

## XENOGLOSSIA IN CORINTH

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### I. METHOD OF RESEARCH

One question about New Testament speaking in languages is whether there was more than one type. Among evangelicals it is agreed that speaking in languages was a first-century phenomenon involving actual human languages. Not everyone agrees that there was a “second type.”

#### A. Terminological Approach

There is a lack of finality in the vocabulary approach regarding  $\gamma\lambda\omega\sigma\sigma\alpha$  (tongue, language) as well as  $\lambda\alpha\lambda\epsilon\omega$  (speak) and  $\delta\iota\epsilon\rho\mu\eta\nu\omega$  (interpret, translate). What a word means elsewhere does not necessarily determine its usage here, especially if it is a unique matter. The statistically most likely meaning may be set aside by the peculiarities of a special setting. Inasmuch as the meaning of an expression is ultimately determined by its context anyway, it is better to examine the characteristics of the situation than to rely on word usage elsewhere. Any uniformity that can be found, however, for  $\gamma\lambda\omega\sigma\sigma\alpha$  as a reference to actual human languages does tend to shift the burden of proof onto someone who claims a non-language character for speaking in languages. The positive evidence for glossolalia based on word usage becomes a difficulty for those who call for a special usage not evidenced elsewhere. One offsetting consideration might be that if there were no other examples of what was happening among the Christians, referring to it by the closest word available could explain a special meaning.

Words get their meanings from their settings. A word’s meaning, then, is learned from its contexts. Interpreters must not confuse the reality itself, the perception of it, the idea about the reality (conception), and the word that represents the idea about the reality (language).

#### B. Examples of Approach

1. Starting with Cornelius and moving to Pentecost is illustrated by William L. Hendricks, “Glossolalia in the New Testament,” in *Speaking in Tongues: Let’s Talk About It* (ed. by Watson Mills, Word Books, 1973), pp. 51-52.

2. Starting with 1 Corinthians **12-14** as defining a double possibility and then moving to Acts is another approach.

3. Starting with Acts **2** and supposing that other cases are the same seems to be the most natural method. Only those marks in Acts **10-11**, Acts **19**, Mark **16:17**; 1 Corinthians **12-14** that would not harmonize with the picture in Acts **2** could justify supposing that tongues had more than one type. This procedure seems best because Acts **2** is the first example of language speaking in the New Testament. It is also a clear account of what they were, because in the record of it a good amount of description accompanies the phenomenon. The importance of starting with Acts **2**, then, is that beginning elsewhere allows for unfalsifiable claims based on ambiguous language (like that of 1 Corinthians **14**) and thereby creates a negative burden of proof, which is always an invalid thinking pattern.

### C. Experiential Approach

A common approach begins with a personal or observed verbal experience. The elements of the procedure are as follows:

1. The observation is made that there is Christian fruit in the life of the person involved.
2. The event occurred in connection with acts done to honor Jesus.
3. It cannot be “my own act” because people cannot do such a thing on their own. It cannot be by Satan’s power because it honors Christ; so it must be the Spirit’s work.
4. The observer consults scripture to see if the experience fits with what is taught there. The approach, however, does not well demonstrate *sola scriptura* because experience provides the precise information about what occurred. Scripture may not be precise enough to eliminate a certain possibility; so the fact that it can be made to fit with scripture does not establish it as true. In the case of glossolalic languages, it does not mean that an experience can be identified, say, with languages in a “second sense,” because that second sense (second kind of languages) cannot be positively established in the first place. Since everything mentioned in 1 Corinthians 14 (and elsewhere) fits with actual human languages, the precise nature of the “second type” comes from experience rather than scripture.

“Baptism in the Spirit as evidenced by the speaking in tongues” is considered a self-authenticating experience. In other words, it is so clearly real that the people who experience it accept it as real even though they cannot explain it or answer objections people may raise about it. The problem is that “self-authenticating” may mean nothing more than vivid subjectivity devoid of objective evaluation. Furthermore, it confuses the vivid reality of the experience and the explanation of the cause and meaning of the experience. The fact of the experience is a different thing from what identity of it and means behind it. No one denies that those who have had an experience have had it, sometimes a life-changing one. The objection is to identifying it with New Testament speaking in languages and concluding that God dispensed his Spirit to bring that experience about. The person experiencing it is in no better position than anyone else to explain its source, significance, and identity with the New Testament phenomenon.

## II. TONGUES IN ACTS 2

### A. Observations that they were actual languages (xenoglossia)

1. “*They began to speak in other tongues [έτεραις γλώσσαις] as the Spirit gave them utterance*” (2:4b).
2. “*They were hearing them speak to each one in their own language [διαλέκτῳ] in which they were born*” (2:6 + 8; note 2:11, γλώσσαις). The amazement in the audience was produced by seeing these Palestinian commoners preaching in distant Gentile “dialects/vernaculars.”

3. No interpreter was needed for the Parthians, Medes, and the rest, to know that these Jews were talking about the “mighty works of God” (2:11).

B. Observations posed against their being actual languages

1. The idea that the miracle was in the hearing rather than in the speaking

a. “We hear them speaking.”

(1) The text is explicit, however, that the apostles spoke in other languages. If they spoke in other languages, the audience would hear them speaking in other languages. If the miracle were in the hearing, the apostles would not be speaking in other languages as the text says.

(2) The visible manifestation was tongues over the speakers.  
 (3) The Holy Spirit came on the speakers, not the hearers.  
 (4) Acts 2:4 sets the stage so that 2:6, 11 is understood in light of the preceding, not *vice versa*.

(5) In the other cases of language speaking, the miracle clearly occurs with the speakers, especially in Corinth because “no one understood.”

(6) One wonders where the charge of drunkenness would come from if they were all hearing their own language only. Why would everyone not have been endowed with the power of interpretation instead? (The charge could have been made because of the message rather than the sound of foreign languages.) Evidently some of them could hear languages they did not recognize—perhaps from another apostle nearby.

Speaking in a language does not require a preposition. In Acts 26:14 “*speaking to me in the Hebrew language*” is worded τῇ Ἑβραϊστῇ διαλέκτῳ. In 1 Corinthians 14:21 “*in/with other languages and with other lips I will speak to this people*” is worded ἐν ἑτερογλώσσοις καὶ ἐν χείλεσιν ἑτέροις [ἐτέρων] λαλήσω τῷ λαῷ τούτῳ.

b. The number of nations was too large to be addressed by twelve languages.

(1) The number of language groups could probably have been covered by twelve men speaking simultaneously in various areas in the temple court, a twenty-seven-acre area on Mt. Moriah.

(2) The deliveries could have been made in series so that more than twelve languages would have been used.

(3) Quite a few foreign Jews would have known Aramaic, but the comment had to do with languages wherein they were born. Greek would have served for the vast majority and would perhaps qualify as a language “*wherein they were born.*” Since many Israelites would have known Greek, however, we wonder whether speaking Greek would have elicited the comment or would have had much sign value.

c. Each heard them speaking in their own language while we know they heard in their own language.

Each hearing them speaking may be regarded as a distributive singular (cp. “Put spoons, knives, and forks by the plates when you set the table.” See also Ephesians 4:2a, 18, 23; 5:19; 6:14, 22; and Philemon 25?).

## 2. The charge that the speakers were drunk (2:13)

a. Hearing an unknown language could elicit that remark as surely as hearing an ecstatic utterance could, particularly if the mockers were near an apostle that spoke a language they did not understand.

b. Perhaps some Palestinian Jews, being somewhat unsympathetic toward Hellenists, resented the presence of foreign elements in the temple precincts.

c. If the mockers understood the message, perhaps they were mocking it—the resurrection, Jesus as the Messiah, a suffering Messiah. At any rate, a person does not have to be drunk to be accused of it. Paul was accused of being crazy (Acts 26:24); Jesus was accused of having a demon (John 8:48).

3. Other (kinds of) languages (έτέραις 2:4): έτέραις as distinguished from ἄλλαις supposedly means another as to kind rather than another as to number. John 14:16 and 1 Corinthians 14:17 are presented as examples. In 1 Corinthians 12:10, 28, the text says “kinds of tongues” (γένη γλωσσῶν).

a. The words do not, however, have to differ in this manner—a distinction more characteristic of classical Greek than the Hellenistic Greek of the New Testament. If distinguished, ἔτερος regards the “other” in distinction, disjunction, contrast to the form—a matter of identity more than kind. Ἄλλος regards it as separate. With ἄλλος, so to speak, they face one another, but with ἔτερος do not. The pattern seems evident from the following passages: 1 Corinthians 12:9-10 uses them interchangeably in regard to the same list; Luke 5:7; 7:41; 8:6, 7, 8; 11:16, 26 (= Matthew 12:45); John 19:37; Acts 13:35; 20:15 (= 27:3); Romans 7:3; Galatians 1:19; Hebrews 5:6; 7:11; 11:36.

b. A difference even in kind might address the cause of the languages rather than the kind of languages.

c. The difference in kind might arise from a Semitic vs. non-Semitic distinction. 1 Corinthians 14:21 (ἐν ἔτερογλώσσοις) is instructive and could fit either (a) or (c) because actual human languages are in view in this reference to the Old Testament Book of Isaiah (28:11-12). The Septuagint for Isaiah 28:11 is διὰ γλώσσης ἔτέρας. Other kinds of tongues do not have to be unearthly as well as earthly, angelic as well as human, natural as well as supernatural. The quotation from Isaiah is about human languages—the languages of foreigners.

## 4. Same as the ecstatic utterances in Caesarea (11:15, 17)

The case of Cornelius’ household does not involve ecstatic utterance, however. That they had no control over their beginning to speak either in Acts 2 or Acts 10 is not a necessary inference from the text. Even if they did not, the ecstatic nature of these speakings is not supported (anymore than at the confusion of languages in Genesis 11:1-9).

### III. LANGUAGE SPEAKING IN 1 CORINTHIANS 14

#### A. Introductory considerations

1. Some elements of the description in 1 Corinthians **14** either differ from those of Acts **2** or involve matters not specified elsewhere. Most are readily answerable; others have more cogency to them.

	Pentecost	Corinth
(a)	everyone understood ( <b>2:6</b> )	no one understood ( <b>14:2</b> )
(b)	tongues spoken to men ( <b>2:6</b> )	spoken to God ( <b>14:2</b> )
(c)	no interpreter needed ( <b>2:6</b> )	interpreter needed ( <b>14:23, 28</b> )
(d)	sign to believers ( <b>11:15</b> )	sign to unbelievers ( <b>14:22</b> )
(e)	strangers awed ( <b>2:7-8</b> )	think they are mad ( <b>14:23</b> )

2. Three explanations could account for these differences.

a. A difference in the circumstance: the hearers in Acts could understand the languages without supernatural aid, but the hearers in Corinth were having to listen to people misuse the gift by using it in languages none—or almost none—of them knew.

b. A difference in the nature of the tongues themselves

(1) Some commentators view the Corinthian tongues as illegitimate because they were uncontrolled ecstatic utterance rather than human languages. Paul was content to deal with the problem pastorally by putting enough regulations on using them that they could no longer be done unless they were genuine.

(2) Other writers consider them as structured languages of angels (1 Corinthians **13:1**). Most Pentecostals do not believe that the “second kind of tongues” is ecstatic gibberish or babble. They suppose they are actually verbalizing in something that may be called a language. Thus there are three proposed understandings of languages in the New Testament: actual human languages, angelic languages, and ecstatic utterance. The last two are only theoretically different from each other.

c. A difference in the use of the word γλῶσσα (*glōssa*): in Acts γλῶσσα means language, but in 1 Corinthians Paul nuances γλῶσσα to mean a language the hearer does not understand. Combined with γλῶσσα, λαλέω lends itself to this distinction because it focuses on the speaking in contrast to λέγω, which focuses more on the form that can then carry meaning. Consequently, speaking in a language contrasts with prophesying as non-communicative speech contrasts with communicative speech.

It is clarifying to say “language(s)” in the expression “speaking in languages/a language.” Part of what opens the door to supposing non-language utterance is that modern English seldom uses *tongue* to mean “language.” *Tongues* is a relatively meaningless word, and therefore can get filled with foreign meaning; current usage reserves it for the mouth organ (whereas Greek uses γλῶσσα for the tongue and for language). From this point forward, we use *language* rather than *tongue* to illustrate the difference it makes when the normal word

*languages* replaces the ambiguous term *tongues* throughout, thereby reproducing the continuity of usage in the Greek text of 1 Corinthians 14.

3. The method required: understanding the ambiguous in light of the clear and thereby shouldering the positive burden of proof

If the descriptive elements in 1 Corinthians were indecisive as to the nature of this language speaking, proper procedure would still call for understanding these languages as actual languages, because Acts 2 sets the framework for determining their nature. As long as other descriptions fit with actual languages, there is no reason to bring in a second type. The situation does not seem to be so imprecise, however, because actual languages are evidently in Paul's mind as the following observations below about what was happening in Corinth.

B. Arguments for their being actual human languages, not "angelic" ones

1. The phenomenon was capable of serving as a sign to unbelievers (14:22; cp. 16:17).

a. If εἰς σημεῖον (*eis sēmeion*) means "is of significance/is meaningful" as far as an unbeliever knows, the languages must be actual languages that outsiders could understand. They could recognize in the message something that addressed the secret yearnings of their heart (14:25). "Secrets of the heart" could be a prophet's knowing things about the hearers without being told (cp. John 4:19). More likely the message addressed the general yearnings of the human heart and fostered intuitive acceptance. "*That God is surely among you*" could compare with "*you are the Son of God*" in the mouth of Nathaneal (John 1:47-51) or the Roman centurion at Christ's crucifixion (Mark 15:39).

The importance of "sign to unbelievers" lies in their not needing the gift of interpretation. Unbelievers could not understand if language speaking were languages of angels or ecstatic non-language.

b. If the sign value is evidential in the sense that a hearer could recognize something miraculous was happening (people speaking a language they would not know), the phenomenon would have to be recognizable as supernatural. This means again that languages have to be recognizable languages. These "languages" could not have any proof value unless they were something God would need to enable a person to do (cp. John 3:2). What is not capable of being verified or falsified is not capable of bearing proof. The nature of languages here had to be different from what was going on down the road in the mouth of the priestess at the Delphic oracle or no one could distinguish pagan practice and divine manifestation. Unbelievers had to be able to appreciate what was occurring. What occurs in pagan religions cannot mark Christianity.

The foregoing argument assumes that the sign could mark Christianity in contrast to demonic and parapsychological phenomena. Perhaps Christianity could be marked by some trait without being distinctively so marked. Supernatural, for example, is available through satanic as well as divine sources. Consequently, we could remember that combinationalism takes evidence as a cluster to create cumulative effect. We could also remember that scripture often does not distinguish primary proof and confirmatory evidence.

Paul would still not have in mind “languages of angels” here because no one has heard “languages of angels” so as to identify something as an example of them. When the angels appeared to people in biblical times, they spoke the languages of the ones they visited.

How can we explain the combination that languages are for a sign to unbelievers and yet unbelievers will think people are crazy if they come in and everybody is speaking in languages (14:23)? The answer is either that they will think the people are crazy because everybody is talking at once (chaos), that the speakers are “out of control,” or that the languages are not being translated (mystery). The likelihood is that these unbelievers will not understand the languages either.

If Jewish hearers mocked actual languages in Acts 2, pagans would surely have done the same—or more—with non-languages. What people mock does not carry convincing power for them.

2. Paul is talking about “sounds in the world” (14:7-11), so not that of “angels.”
3. Not knowing the meaning of the languages would cause a person to be viewed as a “foreigner” (14:11), not an angel.
4. Paul considered Isaiah 28:11-12 applicable to the Corinthian languages (cp. Deuteronomy 28:49-50; Isaiah 66:18; Jeremiah 5:15). The passage deals with foreigners (Assyrians) speaking to Israel (14:21). So Paul is talking about languages of people, not languages of angels.

5. The prophet is in control of himself (14:32). Consequently, these languages are not glossolalic expression arising from uncontrollable ecstasy that would cause a visitor to think the people were crazy.

6. Languages here are capable of being made plural: note 14:5, 18, 21, 22, 23, 39 as opposed to singulars in 14:2, 4, 13, 14, 19, 26?, 27. What can be made plural must have boundaries; a language must be a system parallel to other systems or it cannot be made plural. There is no way to make “gibberish” plural—“gibberishes.” Consequently, even if we were to understand “languages of angels” as other than a hyperbole, the “languages” would have to be systematic articulations. If language speaking is random sounds, it cannot be made plural.

7. Languages could be interpreted, or translated (12:30; 14:5, 13, 26, 27), to give meaning. The terms ἐρμηνεύω (Luke 24:27; John 1:42; 9:7; Hebrews 7:2) and διερμηνεύω (Luke 24:27; Acts 9:36; 1 Corinthians 12:30; 14:5, 13, 27) mean “to translate,” or with the latter term “to expound” (Luke 24:27). What can be translated must have meaning to be translated. To have meaning, languages must have structure (even if they are “languages of angels”); because it is by structure that meaning is carried and conveyed. No structure, no meaning, no translation. Any phenomenon that does not have analyzable structure cannot fall under Paul’s usage of “languages” in this chapter. Languages were able to become prophecy. Languages-unto-prophecy means sounds with agreed-upon significance (14:7-11). So, these languages in Corinth were not non-linguistic glossolalia.

8. In praying in languages, you are truly giving thanks all right (14:17). The person is communicating something. (*You* is a separate pronoun in the Greek text, hence, emphatic. Subject pronouns are not needed in Greek because finite verbs have endings that indicate person and number)

9. Even if the other persons were ἴδιώται (*idiōtai*), they would know what you are saying and could say “Amen” to it. An “idiotes” is a layman, a non-specialist, perhaps a

person without a gift—like the gift of interpretation. Consequently, language speakers are saying something. They are using a sound-symbol system; otherwise, they could not be saying anything. This fact stands over against something meant by God back to himself without the human instruments having any idea of what is passing through their voices. That alternate view pictures language speaking as something where the speakers do not mean anything because they do not understand what they are saying.

### C. Arguments posed against their being actual human languages

#### 1. They were “*languages of angels.*”

A number of considerations make clear, however, that languages of angels in 1 Corinthians 13:1 is hyperbole for emphasis, not sober literalism.

a. The context of 1 Corinthians 13:1 is hyperbolic: remove mountains (13:2; cp. Matthew 17:20; 21:21 = Mark 11:23; Luke 17:6), give my body to be burned (13:3; note textual question “that I might be proud”), know all mysteries and all knowledge (13:2), give all my goods to feed the poor (13:3). A similar heightened expression occurs in Galatians 1:8-9: “*Though an angel from heaven should preach any other gospel . . . let him be accursed.*”

b. Angels are spirits, who do not have flesh and bones (Luke 24:3; Hebrews 1:4, 14); consequently, in their own natural form of being, they have no physical tongues to make sounds with; hence, angels do not communicate by physical means. “*The word spoken by angels*” (Hebrews 2:2) happened in times of manifestation to human beings, when angels entered the material realm. In such cases they were speaking in human languages.

The idea that angels communicate, though true, is not enough. In order for angelic languages to explain human glossolalia, angels would have to communicate in their own realm in a way that could be duplicated by flesh-and-bones people. That is what we have no basis for saying they do, because they are not physical beings.

c. Such a view commits a person to the idea that there is atmosphere in heaven for fleshly tongues to make sounds with.

d. Paul identifies languages with the temporary and temporal matters of this life in contrast to love, which never falls; speaking in languages will not occur in “the perfect” (13:8). Languages of angels cannot be literal; otherwise, they would be in this life (the “in-part” situation) and in the hereafter (the perfect). But the “in-part” will be done away when “the perfect” comes. In the face-to-face relationship, we will be with angels and like them—spiritual; consequently, we cannot now be receiving something angels do not have.

e. Languages of angels could not have evidential force. But Paul teaches in 14:23 that languages are a sign, or “sign-ificant,” to unbelievers. How would people ever know that what they witnessed was a language of the angels unless they had previously known what such a thing was like? And if angels’ realm differs from ours, how would a human person ever find out what their languages are like?

f. Language of angels would have to have structure to convey meaning. As a sound-symbol system, language relies on form to represent meaning. Linguistic analysis can determine whether an utterance has linguisticality.

g. Those who followed the apostles were not linguists or psychoanalysts who could verify scientifically that they were dealing with an actual specimen of language. They had

to recognize it as language in some down-to-earth way. They could do that if they knew the language they were hearing and knew that these people were not native speakers of it. For this reason, in today's situation languages cannot be ancient human languages now dead or a human language from some obscure tribal people no one here knows. Typical "people on the street" could not render a verdict in such cases; so they could have no evidential force for them.

h. There is no reason to believe that there was a confusion of languages among the angels as was the case among men. If not for some punitive reason angelic languages were confused, we wonder why they would differ from one another?

2. Languages are addressed to God (14:2, 28) and to oneself (14:28; cp. 14:4). Some have maintained that 1 Corinthians 14 refers to prayer language because of 14:2, 14-19, 28.

a. More strictly, the text says, "*Those who speak in a language speak to God.*" "Address" implies intentionally directed speech, something not evident in the verse. Languages were not directed to God intentionally as shown by the following points. The marks of human language have been noted. "Speak to oneself" might be hyperbole, though doubtful. That "speaking to oneself" (14:28b) can occur while the speakers are keeping silent (14:28a). They are verbalizing to themselves and, as we say, praying silently. Meditation and communion both fit with silently speaking to themselves. Neither are closely tied to specific wording.

b. The reason the language speaker speaks to God is that "no man understands." Speaking to God was by default, not intent. God was the only one left who understood. The absolute "no one" would not have to include those with the gift of interpretation or those with the language as their native language. Since it cannot be really absolute, it may be wise even to suppose that a few speakers of a language were present on occasion. Perhaps simultaneous languages speaking got started in Corinth as a way to communicate to small pockets of foreign-language speakers that showed up at the services. Paul would then have been telling language speakers to translate so everyone could profit. For all practical purposes, no one was understanding.

c. What sense does it make for God to talk to himself? If speakers in a language have no idea what they are saying and if the Spirit of God is giving them a message appropriate for listeners, what intentional purpose could it serve for God? "*You are giving thanks all right*" and "blessing" (14:17); if so, God is not originating the message. If speakers have no idea what they are saying, they are not saying it. Having God talking to himself removes it from being an interpersonal experience, and it breaks the principle that miraculous gifts are for other than the ones who have them. Jesus did not turn the stones into bread, and Paul did not cure himself of the "thorn in the flesh."

If spiritual gifts are not for benefiting the person who has them, speaking in languages is not for the speaker's benefit. As a counter comment, the statements in 14:4, 28 are raised. "*Those who speak in a language edify themselves*" (14:4) is true when the communication loop is completed (as when interpretation takes place, the hearer knows the language, the language speaker has also the gift of interpretation, or understands the flow of thought—just not the word-by-word level). The purpose of languages is not to edify oneself, but to edify others; however, when communication to others does not take place, the result is that only the speakers are edified, and they end up speaking only to God (14:2). The purpose in such cases differs from the result.

d. Speaking to oneself, 14:4, 28 is sometimes taken as indicating a second kind of languages (“languages of angels”) used in a different setting. These languages are for private use in address to God as in prayer.

Paul does not say in 14:28 that those who speak to themselves do so in a language. They may be running through their minds truths that edify themselves or praise God. In 14:4 the speaking to God and the edifying of self comes while using languages out loud. In 14:28 it comes in speaking to themselves. Whether aloud or silently, and whether in a language or not, the effects are the same. (See comments below under “*the speakers do not understand what they are saying.*”)

Since speaking in languages is a communication gift, it does not necessarily involve revelation as well. The message of those who “*speaks to themselves and to God*” may be a message originating with themselves, not God.

Earlier in the chapter, Paul may have in mind people who have the gift of interpretation as well as languages, and so they edify themselves (14:4) because they are doing for themselves what Paul urges them to do for listeners in 14:6—interpret what they say. Later, Paul recommends praying for the gift of interpretation if the person does not have it. More likely, however, is the proposal that language speakers would be edified by the ideas they had in mind, ideas that speaking in languages enabled them to communicate to others in a language they as speakers did not know.

As to private usage, Paul deals with a situation occurring “in church.” In so doing, he does not tell the Corinthians they are using this gift in the wrong place and should do it at home or alone. Instead, he regulates it as something that can take place in the gathered community. On other occasions involving public *vs.* private, he comes right out and tells them to eat at home (1 Corinthians 11:20-22) or raise questions at home (1 Corinthians 14:35) instead of abusing each other and creating disturbance during fellowship and worship.

In the church (14:18-19) does not have to contrast with in private. It can contrast with in evangelism. The point would then be that languages work well in proclaiming the gospel in cross-cultural settings as a reversal of the tower of Babel. In a cosmopolitan city like Corinth, occasions for using that gift might arise often. They could be adapted to worship settings with a mixed audience, but normally that would not be necessary; gathered worshipers tend to be local and understand the same language. It is not possible to maintain the proposition that languages were intended purely for evangelistic purposes since Acts demonstrates their occurrence in cases where brand new converts spoke in languages aside from any evangelistic effort. But then again, it is not possible to maintain that languages were for private use either. Speaking in languages in places that did not call for them and in ways that were counter-productive, was prompted by desires inappropriate to Christian service. People’s not interpreting when they could shows the motivation behind this language speaking. In Corinth, language speaking seems to have degenerated into attention-getting behavior in place of benefit to others or glory to God.

At any rate, even if “in church” contrasted with “in private,” we do not have to have a second type of language. Speaking in a real language in private would likewise be possible.

e. *Languages* is used parallel to *prophecy* because there is no communication going on if the hearer cannot understand them. If the audience comprehends as at Pentecost or when interpretation is given (14:5), then languages become prophecy. The relationship between



the terms changes from separate circles to one within another. Speaking in languages is a speaking gift, not necessarily a content gift. It does not convey a message—prophecy—if the hearer does not understand it.

### 3. Someone unlearned or unbelieving will think you are crazy (14:23).

That observation does not show they were not real languages. A similar reaction came from skeptical people in Acts 2, where actual languages were spoken. Skeptics accused them of being drunk, which is comparable to being crazy. In another incident, Festus told Paul he was crazy even when Festus knew the language and understood the message (Acts 26:24). The Pharisees accused Jesus of being a demoniac Samaritan when they could not understand what he was telling them in their own language (John 8:48).

4. Speakers do not understand what they are saying (14:14). In 14:2 the apostle says that no one understands. In 14:14 he adds, “*If I pray in a language, my spirit prays, but my understanding is unfruitful.*” Paul would rather pray with his understanding also (14:15, 19). These verses should not be taken to mean that language speakers have no idea what they are saying, with the inference that what they’re saying comes from God. The following considerations provide an alternative reconstruction of this matter.

By “understand” Paul means the element-by-element, word-for-word level in contrast to the general conceptual flow. Understanding always occurs at the conceptual level in language speaking, but not necessarily at the word level. It is language, not concept, that is at issue in language speaking and interpretation. We take it that Paul refers to the conceptual level when he uses the word “spirit.” In like manner he refers to the word level when he says that the understanding, or mind, is unfruitful (14:14-19). Revelation is concept; languages and interpretation are matters of language.

The text does not say that Paul does not understand when he speaks in a language. Since speaking in languages is a language gift rather than a revelation or content gift, he surely means that he did not understand the language, not that he did not understand the thought.

Paul goes on say that the hearer cannot say “Amen” to a prayer spoken in a language because “*he does not know what you are saying.*” Indeed, how can “you” say “Amen” to your own prayer or even be said to be praying? It is no good to say, “I agree with the spirit/feel/attitude of the prayer”; the one occupying the place of the “idiotes” could say that. If language speaking should not be done when the “other” has no understanding, language speaking in prayer to God should not be done when the speaker does not understand, which would amount to prohibiting language speaking; but Paul does not do that.

a. You are giving thanks, all right, but you are not edifying others. It is doubtful how proper it would be to speak of giving thanks if the speakers did not understand that they were giving thanks—if they did not understand at all what they were “saying.” What point would there be in prayer if the speaker was not offering the content? Perhaps it is imaginable how people proclaiming to other people would be doing something real and beneficial even

though they themselves had no idea what God was saying through them. It would at least be communication. But in the case of prayer, the speaker and the hearer would be the same person: God. First, what sense would it make for God to talk to himself? At least what sense would it make to call it “communication”? Second, what would the text possibly mean by saying that the speaker is giving thanks (cp. “magnifying God,” Acts 10:46)? The point here is reinforced by the express use of the pronoun you with the verb “thank”: “You are giving thanks all right, but you are not edifying the other.” If the pronoun “you” (*σύ*) contrasts with “other” (*έτερος*), it stresses the fact that you does understand the message spoken in a language.

b. Edification does occur despite their not “understanding.” Edification is not simply affective exhilaration, but cognitive “eye-opening.” Therefore, edification must be understanding, but at a different level.

If “edify themselves” in 14:4 meant affective uplift, the persons nearby would also be edified by knowing that the supernatural hand of God was penetrating the world right beside them; yet 14:17 says that those hearers are not edified. In 14:26, edification comes from psalms, teaching, revelation, languages, interpretation. Although singing might involve the emotional side, the emphasis is on cognitive forms of communication. Edifying others happens when languages are translated to become prophecy (14:5). The other people in 14:17 are not edified because they do not know what is being said. The intended use of spiritual gifts is edification (14:12).

c. Paul contrasts speaking in languages with speaking five words with his understanding. He seems to contrast the language-speaking type of understanding with the word-level communication.

d. Singing with the spirit (14:15) is *ψάλλω* (*psallō*), “to sing a psalm,” not *ἀδω* (*adō*), “to praise” (Ephesians 5:19a), or *αἰνέω* (*aineō*), “to sing” (Luke 2:13). It is even used in Ephesians 5:19b in apparent contrast to *ἀδω* (“to sing”). *Ψάλλω* most likely means “singing psalms.” If so, a set and known content is involved. Secondly, *τῷ πνεύματι* (*tōi pneumati*, “with the spirit”) is comparable to *τῇ καρδίᾳ* (*tēi kardiāi*, “with the heart”) in Ephesians 5:19. Finally, “singing in the spirit” may not be singing in languages.

e. Except they interpret/translate (14:5) may mean, not that they have also the gift of interpretation (contrast above), but that they are explaining the message, which they know at the conceptual level. The gift of interpretation would normally be for interpreting someone else’s language. Praying to interpret their own language (14:13) would presumably be so they could express in their own language the word-for-word presentation they had just spoken in a language. Another possibility is that in the case where content is known, “interpret” would be explaining the meaning rather than translating the language. “Interpret” (*ἐρμηνεύω*, *hermēneuō*) can mean to translate from one language to another or to explain something differently in the same language.

f. Nowhere in Corinthians or elsewhere does scripture indicate that speaking in languages necessarily involves a revelation of what people say in those languages. In fact, 14:26 distinguishes the two gifts. Of course, were people to have both gifts, they could combine them on an occasion like Pentecost (cp. 14:30).

g. “Speaking mysteries” (14:2) does not have to mean “hidden things” to the speaker or the whole world. They were mysteries to listeners who did not understand the words.

h. In witnessing or in teaching believers, how could language speakers field questions about their message if they had no idea what they had just said? On Pentecost, for example, Peter was speaking in languages when he preached what is recorded. How would he

understand the audience's question when they responded to his presentation? Even worse, he would not know what answer the Holy Spirit was giving them. It would apparently be a surprise to him when they come to him then, wanting him to help them obey what they had heard him say about getting baptized. Similarly in Corinth, how would speakers answer questions about what they just said (**14:35**)?

i. In prayer especially, if speakers had no idea what they were saying, we say again that God would simply be talking to himself.

Even if this alternate reconstruction does not commend itself as the point, it is satisfactory enough to indicate another way to read the text. If so, the "not understand" factor falls out as a distinctive mark for a second type of language speaking found at Corinth.

We summarize with a list of approaches to the statement that in prayer the ones that speak in languages are praying while their understanding is not: (a) idea level vs. verbal level, as advocated above; (b) emotional level vs. rational level; (c) enthusiasm vs. content; and (d) intention vs. result.

#### **5. The languages are “unknown” (14:2).**

The word "unknown" in the Authorized Version does not appear in the original text. Even if it did, it would not mean the language was unknown to mankind and therefore was angelic utterance. It could be unknown to the speaker even as "new languages" (Mark **16:17**) can be new to the speaker rather than to mankind. Similarly, the "other languages" (Acts **2:4**; 1 Corinthians **14:21**) are other than what the speaker used normally.

Our summary comments on proposals for a second type of languages are these: scriptural statements are being accommodated to the experience of people who have done what they suppose is language speaking. Since they did not understand what they were saying, they suppose **14:14** means that. Since the sounds they made were not understandable to anybody around them, they suppose that unknown languages in **14:2** (KJV) means unknown to mankind, and so on. The experience is providing the precise information for the way the wording of the text is understood. The assumption is that their experience is what this text is talking about. Since that is not necessarily the case, the interpretation is not really an interpretation of the text.

#### **D. Summary of main points of interpretation in 1 Corinthians 14**

1. Languages speak to God because no human understands; they speak to God by default.
2. The speakers do not understand at the element-by-element level, but they know at the conceptual level.
3. The language speakers are accused of being crazy because the hearers cannot understand what they are speaking—or the speakers are all talking at once.
4. Those who speak in languages edify themselves by conceptual edification.
5. They speak mysteries as far as the audience is concerned.
6. "Languages of angels" is exaggeration for emphasis.

### Summary of Characteristics of “Languages”

1. Languages are actual human languages (xenoglossia).
2. Speakers control when they use the gift.
3. Speakers are in control of themselves while they use the gift.
4. They understand conceptually what they are saying while they are using the gift.
5. The gift of languages is a supernatural gift. It is not “primed” into existence. A person does not just decide to do it; it is a gift. Being emotionally “driven” does not enhance the coming of the gift.
6. Speakers evidently can match the language of the one(s) they address.
7. Speaking in languages is a language-speaking ability; it does not necessarily involve a revealed content as well.
8. Speaking in languages is such that it can serve as a sign to unbelievers.

### Conclusion

These considerations lead to the conclusion that the New Testament gives no basis for the idea that there is a second type of legitimate speaking in languages.

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