

Book Review

Glossolalia and the Problem of Language. *Nicholas Harkness*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2021. ix + 231pp.

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What is the problem of language, and how does glossolalia (i.e., speaking in tongues) help us address it? These are two questions readers of Nicholas Harkness's new monograph are likely to ask upon seeing the title of this short yet ambitious and thoughtful book. The problem of language, at least as the author approaches it with ethnographic material from South Korean Christians, becomes a means to explore glossolalia's "problematic relation to language" and rests on deciphering "how and why an experience of language is produced through processes of its own negation" (p. 2). This is one of several paradoxes to which Harkness returns throughout the text: viz., how a phenomenon that lies at the "limits of language"—in its seeming lack of denotation, in its posturing as a communicative medium that occludes communication—is nonetheless deeply productive of a Christian language ideology. With careful attention to the elements of narrative, phonology, pitch, cadence, and even the physicality of breath, Harkness offers a multilayered picture of the semiotic significance of language, not just glossolalia, for the Christians with whom he worked. He shifts attention away from asking the perennial questions of whether glossolalia is linguistically or theologically legitimate to consider its intersection with broader language ideologies. In other words, why are people so invested in what counts as language in the first place?

Following a clearly pitched introduction, Harkness presents six chapters arranged in three dyads. The first pair offers an ethnographic foray into the trajectories that bring Christians, both Pentecostals and those from denominations less often associated with charismatic gifts, into glossolalic practices (*pangŏn* in Korean). These are among the book's most well-developed chapters, as they examine in rich detail how Christians approach the Holy Spirit, at times beginning with trepidation yet evolving in unexpected ways into an ambiguous relationship of trust and uncertainty. Harkness's portrait of Hyejin, a Presbyterian woman, is exemplary in this regard; his description of her grappling with tongues—along with contrapuntal examples from her family members, each of whom develops a different relationship with the practice—reveals the interaction of social class, generational interests, the cultural value of novelty, and anxieties about syncretic residues from shamanic traditions. Chapter two transitions from the narrative of one Korean family to an institutional study of the Yoido Full Gospel Church, a well-known megachurch that serves as one of the author's primary field sites and a "ritual center" (p. 37) for the production of glossolalia and related linguistic genres (like *t'ongsŏng kido*, or cacophonous group prayer). Here the contours of Harkness's main argument take shape. He draws on phonological, prosodic, and even tonal/musical analysis (a methodological callback to Harkness's 2014 study of vocal quality in Korean church choirs, *Songs of Seoul: An Ethnography of Voice and Voicing in Christian South Korea*, University of California Press) to demonstrate the qualities of glossolalia that belie its full identification as language yet still offer unique communicative access to God.

The second set of chapters, although conceptually productive, disrupts the argument's "flow" (*hŭrŭm*), to use an evangelical term (p. 91). Here Harkness puts sermon analysis in the service of teasing out how pastors ideologically justify a sense of shared feeling (chapter three) and the deployment of speech as a conduit for the Word of God and thus as a vehicle for global evangelism (chapter four). These points broaden the scope beyond glossolalia proper, and the author takes care to defend such an interlude by highlighting the parallel processes operating in other linguistic genres, some of which likewise operate at the "limits of language." While a robust study of any "anthropological object" (p. 5) can and ought to extend beyond its formal

boundaries, the connections drawn between transcribed evangelical sermons and glossolalia could be more explicit. For example, in a creative textual and visual examination of Billy Kim's and Billy Graham's 1973 bilingual evangelistic crusade, he establishes the importance of a unique spirit-driven prosody and the fusion of the language and meaning mediated by multiple agents, a return to the question of who is speaking that is equally blurred in glossolalic utterances (pp. 118–19). However, this comparison is not fully drawn out, as Harkness spends little time constructing the link between quite disparate religious expressions; they remain compelling yet mostly independent of one another. Could not a similar comparison be made of myriad other speech genres beyond the two under examination here? How do we know that prayer in tongues operates according to the same principles that motivate Kim and Graham? More fine-tuned ethnographic data would be needed to synthesize the analytic gap between the 'extra-ordinary' account of two famous public figures and glossolalists' encounters with the Holy Spirit.

The final duo of chapters turns back more explicitly to the individual experiences of glossolalists Harkness met in South Korea and introduces some of the most provocative themes for anthropologists of Christianity, as it alludes to unresolved (perhaps unresolvable) questions pervasive among Christian communities around the globe. Chapter five juxtaposes ideologies of the Gospel's circulation with its moral inverse, gossip. By looking to the circulation of such language, whether for godly or worldly ends, Harkness draws attention to how both are figured in an ambiguous space between secrecy and sociality, concealment and transparency. As he argues throughout, speaking in tongues can offer participants the chance to communicate ineffable things with the deity without risking eavesdropping by fellow humans. This material returns to one of the tensions within evangelical language practice, namely the space between the universal, objective truth that evangelical Christianity proclaims and the individuated, subjective worlds of transcendence and personal connection with the divine. This dilemma runs throughout Christian subjectivity, of course, but sharpens into focus around glossolalia.

Chapter six, the final ethnographic chapter, delves into the lingering threat of deception that underlies discourse about glossolalia. Besides being richly illustrated with connections to Korean political/religious scandals, this material poses an opportunity to contribute to a growing literature on doubt and fakery in global Christianities. While the author does not often expand his scope beyond South Korea, there is much resonance between Korean Christians' anxieties over the authenticity of tongues and similar doubts about the genuine sanctity of pastors, preachers, and prophets. As Harkness explains, "When speaking with God in tongues, the prayerful must be sure they have the correct interlocutor; it could be Satan" (p. 150), a proverbial wolf in sheep's clothing. I hear such angst frequently voiced by anti-glossolalist Christians in my own fieldwork in South Africa, but here we observe the nuanced apprehensions that glossolalists themselves experience. What is most remarkable is the set of techniques people develop in response to these uncertainties: socialized modes of discernment, not only to distinguish between holy and satanic voices but to surveil one's *internal* impulses. Finally, the text is rounded out with a short concluding chapter and a helpful etymological genealogy of the origins of the term glossolalia.

Having posed such a provocative set of questions, where does Harkness leave us? For the study of glossolalia, the author challenges us to decompose one-sided theories that reduce it to a purely ecstatic or dissociative form. In proper anthropological fashion, he captures the plurality of the phenomenon, recognizing that speaking in tongues among Korean Presbyterians may not operate the same way as for African Pentecostals, even when they mobilize similar semiotic forms. Looking to the future of this religious phenomenon, though, he oddly suggests that recent uncertainty about glossolalia among its practitioners "prophesies its decline" (p. 168). This conclusion insinuates that doubt ought to be figured as an aberrant feature of religious life. These "feelings of doubt, disappointment, deception, and disillusionment" that portend "an end to the great arc, the last ripples of a once-powerful wave" (p. 169) cast the demise of glossolalia in dramatic, if not apocalyptic, terms. The problem is that no evidence in the text supports the notion that glossolalia, whether in Korea or elsewhere, is actually in decline; on the contrary, anthropologists can point to its rapid ascendance that shows little sign of receding (e.g., *A Diagram for Fire: Miracles and Variation in an American Charismatic Movement*, Jon Bialecki, University of California Press, 2017: 12–16, 136–37). Rather than seeing doubt as inimical to religious life, we might recognize the productivity of doubt itself, a dynamic tension that plays out across the human condition. Harkness does recognize almost parenthetically that religious actors' worries are not just about glossolalia alone but a question of charismatic churches' unstable claims to divine connection, yet this point could be

expanded even further. It is precisely this instability that characterizes much of life within not just Christian spaces but the current historical moment in which radical uncertainty and fear of occult, unknown dangers flourish globally, all the more so among those individuals and institutions that are most intimate (see *The Truth about Crime: Sovereignty, Knowledge, Social Order*, Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff, The University of Chicago Press, 2016).

In addition to scholars of language ideology, glossolalia, and evangelical prayer, this book would be of particular interest for educators seeking a text to add to a graduate seminar on linguistic anthropology or semiotics, as its ample transcript excerpts would provide fodder for productive conversation among students already familiar with the subdiscipline. It could also potentially feature in advanced undergraduate courses, provided it is supplemented with an appropriate theoretical infrastructure (e.g., key conceptual tools like indexicality and interdiscursivity, fluency with which the author presumes). Ironically, somewhat like glossolalia itself, Harkness's prose can be uneven and at times difficult to decipher, despite his demonstrated ability to write adroitly and evocatively. The text indulges in obfuscating expressions that over-rely on jargon and clunky syntax to obscure otherwise brilliant points (even if this sin puts him in good company among semioticians). These difficulties notwithstanding, for readers up to the interpretive journey, this book stands to inspire an exciting new wave of inquiry into the evangelical life of language, even that which is produced—and contested—at its very limits.