Consonant Vowel Co-occurrence Patterns in Glossolalia

A preference for physiologically economical consonant vowel combinations labial+central vowel, coronal+front vowel and velar+back vowel has been identified as characteristic in infant babbling for a number of languages (Davis and MacNeilage 1990 and 1995, Zlatić et al. 1997, Texeira and Davis 2002.) In adult language, where perceptual needs demand combinatorial complexity, these patterns are less robust (Ohala and Kawasaki (1984), Maddieson and Precoda (1992)). Glossolalia, or “speaking in tongues,” has been shown to reflect a simpler phonological make-up than the native language of the glossolalist (Samarin 1972, Chilton 1979), which is related to a lack of one-to-one coding indicative of natural language. In this paper I consider the hypothesis that these physiologically economical consonant-vowel combinations are preferred in the glossolalic utterance of one Korean-English Pentecostal preacher, Pastor X.

To this end, I identify the phoneme/phone inventory, syllable structure and frequency with which phones/phonemes of the three physiologically economical classes co-occur in excerpts taken from Pastor X’s Korean (his L1), English (his L2), and a glossolalic utterance. I conclude that because of factors beyond coding, such as stylistic differentiation and repetition, these combinatorial patterns do not occur significantly more frequently.

While CV co-occurrence may not be pertinent to the glossolalic utterance, a number of other phonological characteristics supporting previous research are shown to occur including:

1. reduced syllable inventory
2. reduced syllable structure
3. unnatural gradience of phone frequency
4. high frequency of [a]

Despite the extensive and growing number of glossolalists in the United States, the phenomenon has received little attention since the 1970’s in the field of linguistics. The findings of my study suggest that further research should examine the relationship between a bilingual glossolalist’s L1 and his/her glossolalic utterance. Pastor X’s glossolalic phonology, for example, impressionistically resembled his Korean phonology more than his English.
References


