

UNDERSTANDING THE GLOSSOLALIA OF HÉLÈNE SMITH, THE FAMOUS SPIRITIST MEDIUM

In 1900 Theodore Flournoy, a Swiss psychologist, published a remarkable book on the visions and language production of the medium he called Héléne Smith. Its title is *Des Indes à la Planète Mars : étude sur un cas de somnambulisme avec glossolalie*. Carl Gustav Jung appreciated this book, and the father of surrealism André Breton in his novel *Nadja* equated Nadja with Héléne Smith. In a survey of case studies in the field of the psychopathology of language, Bobon (1952) amply discusses Héléne Smith's language production. *Des Indes à la Planète Mars* has been translated in various languages and regained renewed interest in the last decennia of the past century¹.

Apart from visual hallucinations of India, the medium had visions of the planet Mars and even auditory hallucinations: she heard messages in what she believed to be the Martian language. This language, a so-called glossolalia, will be the subject of this paper. First of all I will point to relevant aspects of the biography of the medium. Next I will briefly overview the opinions of linguists on the glossolalia. Then I will proceed to a step by step decoding of the Martian. The resulting code will enable us to gain insight into the names of spirits and provide a clue to a possible trauma, lying at the base of the Martian fantasies.

Héléne Smith

Flournoy has given the medium the marvellous pseudonym Héléne Smith. The medium's true name is Catherine-Élise Müller². She is born in 1861 in Martigny (Switzerland) and dies in 1929 in Geneva. When she is seven years old her younger sister Marie suddenly dies. In 1892 she attends seances in Geneva and becomes a medium herself. Her first spirit-guide is Victor Hugo, who is soon replaced by a spirit named Leopold. In 1894, November 25, she has her first vision of the planet Mars; in 1896, February 2, she starts talking Martian, and in the same year, November 2, a spirit, named Esenale, translates Martian into French, when Flournoy asks for it. The attendees try to record as accurately as possible the utterances of the medium during the séance. One of the

1. Flournoy 1983 et 1994.
2. Deonna 1932.

sentences in Martian reads: *dodé né ci haudan ti mess métiche Astané*, meaning according to Esenale: *ceci est la maison du grand homme Astané* (this is the house of the great man Astané).

Research into the glossolalia

By comparing the Martian texts with the French translations Flournoy himself quickly discovered that Martian was French in structure – only the words were new and seemingly incomprehensible. Victor Henry, professor at the Sorbonne, tried to explain the word formation on the basis of various languages, such as French, German, and English but also Hungarian and even Sanskrit. In 1901 he published a book on the Martian language. Henry's study was severely criticized by Ferdinand de Saussure, founder of modern linguistics and living in Geneva, who himself had attended some of the séances of the medium³. De Saussure himself thought the Martian words were a complete arbitrary transformation of French words. Recently Yaguello (1984) studied the sounds in the language and compared Martian to child language and to the cryptophasia of the alienated. She assumed a non-linguistic Ego producing the language. As we shall see, this last assumption can be questioned. Cifali (1988), working from a psychoanalytic perspective, stressed the relational aspects of the making of the Martian.

Flournoy's two questions

Let's have a closer look at the Martian language, especially its first beginnings⁴. Flournoy, not understanding a word of the medium's speech on February 2 1896, asked her for her name. It is the answer to this question, an answer never studied before, that gives us a clue to the language. The answer was *basimini météche*.

Why this utterance was never studied? Victor Henry considered the very first Martian utterances as just a sort of proto-Martian, deserving no attention, and limited his research to those Martian texts, which were translated by the spirit Esenale. Esenale was not yet in function when *basimini météche* was uttered by the medium. This answer to Flournoy's question about her name might thus mean anything, even "I will not tell you" or "it is secret". Nothing indicates that it is a name; even the fact that two words are produced does not mean that they indicate first and last name of the Martian incarnation of our medium.

Basimini

So why then start with *basimini*? The reason is that there seems to be little strange in *basimini*, as it resembles very much a word in the medium's mother tongue, French,

3. Yaguello 1984, p. 123.

4. Reported in detail by Cifali 1988.

namely *catimini*, which means “secretly”. The syllable *cat* seems to have been replaced by *bas*, and this is perfectly understandable, if we think of the Greek prefix *cata* which means *en bas* in French. So *cat* seems to be kept secret by the medium. This syllable is also the beginning of the medium’s first name Catherine, a Greek first name, meaning “the pure”, and thus *catimini* indeed seems to hint at a proper name.

It is Saint Catherine of Alexandria who is referred to as “the pure” and this leads us to sort of an *Aha-Erlebnis*. The feast day of this saint, the 25th of November, is the day the Martian visions started in 1894. Furthermore Saint Catherine is the patron saint of the millers, and the medium’s surname is Müller, a German word meaning “miller”. The medium may well have been acquainted with the legend of Saint Catherine as *coiffer Sainte Catherine* is a standard expression in French.

What about the second part *météche* of the medium’s answer to Flournoy’s question about her name? Again, nothing indicates that it will be a surname. Maybe the medium, being polite, answers in a disguised form “*Catherine, monsieur.*” Martian *météche* defies an easy explanation.

After answering Flournoy’s first question the medium restarts talking incomprehensibly in Martian. Therefore Flournoy again interrupts and asks her who were present at an earlier séance. She answers that *métiche* Cuendet⁵ was present, and this means according to Flournoy: *monsieur* Cuendet. Note the resemblance of the earlier *météche* to *métiche*. More interesting is that the medium herself was present, and that she calls herself *métaganiche Müller*, meaning *mademoiselle Müller*. Victor Henry did not study the answers in Martian to Flournoy’s second question, although he knew what these words meant.

Métaganiche

What words are contained in *métaganiche*? The beginning *méta* of *métaganiche* is a Greek prefix, the second part *ganiche* is a non-word, but it resembles very well French *ganache*. This approximation is based on the assumption that Martian is mostly disguised French, and furthermore is based on recent psycholinguistic research on best approximation of non-words, which states that vowels rather than consonants are changed in searching for a word reconstruction⁶.

As will be shown, the first part *made* of *made-moi-selle* seems to be transformed into *méta* and the last part *selle* into *ganache* before fusing together to form *métaganiche*. *Made* is a German word which means *larve* in French. German is a language well known by the medium, as she had three years of training in German. But where is the insect, the “German” insect, which induced the medium to consider *made* as a German word? It follows directly the Martian word *métaganiche*! The medium’s surname Müller is also the German name of a beetle (another word for it is German *Mehlkäfer*,

5. See Cifali 1988, p. 59.

6. Ooijen 1996.

i.e. “meal beetle”) and this may have caused the splitting of *made-moi-selle* into three syllables. A *Made* (larva) changes into an insect by a process of *meta*-morphosis and this word yields the beginning *méta* of *métaganiche*.

The relation of *selle* (saddle) and *ganache* becomes clear from the two meanings of French *ganache*: it refers to a *fauteuil ganache*, thus sort of a seat, and secondly it refers to something associated with “horse”, namely to the lower jaw of a horse. Note furthermore the sound association of German *Käfer* (beetle) and German *Kiefer* (jaw). German words therefore seem to have influenced the formation of *métaganiche* and the medium’s true last name *Müller* acts as a trigger for the insertion of German words in the association process.

Esenale, the translator

Martians words, except the ones spoken during the séance in February 1896, are translated by Esenale. Esenale is introduced in a poem composed of alexandrines, which the medium sends to Flournoy on the 20th of October 1896. The last two lines of this poem read: *Pose bien doucement ta main sur son front pâle/Et prononce bien bas le doux nom d’Esenale*. From then on Flournoy obtains, after laying his hand on the forehead of the medium and saying “Esenale”, the word by word translation of a Martian sentence⁷. How is this miracle-word Esenale composed?

Flournoy thinks that Esenale is a reincarnation of a certain Alexis. Because the name Alexis starts with *ale* and because in the alexandrine, in which he is first mentioned, Esenale rimes on *pâle*, the name Esenale can be split into *Esen* and *ale*. We now simply ask ourselves, what French word might well resemble *Esen*. Again we fix the consonants and look for short French words containing *s* and *n*. Words like *sien*, *sein*, *son* or *soin* fulfil this condition, but the best approximation is clearly *séné*, a name of a plant, also called *séné d’Alexandrie* (Alexandrian senna). It is used as a purgative, its cathartic properties were well known at the end of the 19th century. So Esenale seems to purify the Martian from non-French influences. This is in accordance with the medium’s phantasm about the pure Catherine of Alexandria (*Catherine d’Alexandrie* in French). In the alexandrine in which Esenale is introduced *le doux nom d’Esenale* therefore seems nothing but a disguise of *le doux nom séné d’ale*.

Tarviné (language)

One of the most interesting words in the glossolalia is the word *tarviné*, first used in 1897. As the translator spirit Esenale has indicated, the medium’s word *tarviné* means “language”. What does it say about the character of the language? The end *iné* of this word is a frequently occurring suffix in Martian, as Victor Henry has noted, so let’s suppose *tarve* is the root of the word and, once again, that this word is nothing but a

7. Flournoy 1994, p. 100.

simple transform of a French word. French *torve* (menacing, grim) is a good approximation, but no relation to the meaning “language” of *tarviné* is found. Therefore, let’s try to split the non-word *tarve* into two French words, which fusing together form *tarve*: *tarse* and *larve*. The last word *larve* was already used, when decoding *métaganiche*, so it may have a function in the formation of *tarviné* as well. But what about *tarse*?

Tarse may denote a name of a town or part of the foot. Tarse is the French name of Saint Paul’s birthplace in Cilicia. In his letters to the Corinthians Saint Paul referred to the practice of glossolalia (called *parler en langues* in French). Now, here we have a link to the kind of language the medium is producing. Note that *tarviné* is first used, when the medium announces Martian writing: *zé forimé ti viche tarviné*, i.e. “the signs of our language”⁸. The Martian article *zé* sounds the same as French *zée* meaning “Peterfish”, named after Saint Peter. The sound of *zé* sort of paves the way for Saint Paul and *tarse*.

As to the second word *larve*: French *larve* derives from Latin *Larvae*. The Larvae – as well as the so-called Lemures – were the spirits of the dead in ancient Rome. So *tarviné* seems to refer to speaking in tongues (glossolalia) and to the language of the dead, quite in agreement with the character of the language and its spiritist background.

But a little bit more can be said about *tarviné*. From the French word *tarse* (part of the foot) is derived French *tarsier*, a half ape, called *Koboldmaki* in German. As the animal name *maki* is a synonym of lemur, Martian is also the language of the lemurs, or Lemures, who in turn are related to the Larvae.

Key and code

Further analysis of Martian words leads to the following model for the glossolalia⁹. The names Catherine and Müller are keys to the language. Code words, corresponding to the key Catherine, are for example French *quatre*, the name Alexandria and the number 12 (the number of syllables in an alexandrine), and the association of milk and blood, an association derived from the legend of Saint Catherine. Code words, corresponding to the key Müller, are for example French *meilleur* (best) and *lemur*. *Lemur* contains all sounds of the surname Müller of the medium.

Kraepelin’s dream language

The language structure resembles the key-code structure of Kraepelin’s dream language. Forty years long Emil Kraepelin, father of modern psychiatry, collected samples of dream language, because he saw many parallels between his dream language and the schizophasia of his patients¹⁰. Recently the code of the dream language was cracked, and it was

8. *Ibid.*, p. 141.

9. Engels 2004, p. 152-166.

10. Kraepelin 1906; Heynick 1993.

shown that the proper name Kraepelin is the key to the dream language¹¹. Code words are for example *Kröpelin*, Greek *kraipalè* and Latin *praecox*. For example: in one of Kraepelin's dreams the following language disturbance occurs: *Rührochs gibt es nicht mehr*. This sentence can be shown to derive from *praecox gibt es nicht mehr*, which means: there is no more praecox. This dream stems from 1926, half a year before Kraepelin's death. The name *Dementia praecox* was no more in use by then: it was renamed schizophrenia.

Other phenomena

Let us return to our medium and ask ourselves if the decoding of the glossolalia gives us insight in non-linguistic aspects of the so called spiritist phenomena. Having already understood the origin of the name Esenale, we now direct our attention to the most important spirit Leopold. The first spirit appearing to the medium was Victor Hugo, a poet famous for his alexandrines. Why was Hugo her first spirit-guide and subsequently replaced by Leopold? The answer to the first question may be that in 1853 Victor Hugo himself took part in spiritistic séances¹². One of the spirits that were asked to appear during these séances was Leopoldine, Hugo's beloved daughter, died in 1843. Hugo dedicated a series of poems *Les Contemplations* to his daughter Leopoldine. He divided them into two groups, called *Autrefois* and *Aujourd'hui*, referring to the time before and after Leopoldine's drowning in the Seine on the 4th of September 1843, when the sailboat, in which she and her husband were making a trip, turned over¹³.

Remarkably, in a vision, dated by Flournoy about the 4th of September 1898 (that is 55 years after Leopoldine's death) our medium sees a sailboat, propelled by heavy wind¹⁴. She uses an alexandrine (12 syllables in Martian), when indicating the strong current: *zé priāni é founiné ivraïni – le flot est puissant aujourd'hui* – the current is strong today. Flournoy has pointed out that when Hélène Smith uses an alexandrine, it is a remnant of the Hugo-spirit. The last word in the alexandrine *ivraïni* (*aujourd'hui*) is especially interesting because it may refer to the date of the vision. It is only used once in Martian!

The 4th of September 1898 was a Sunday, *Sonntag* in German, a language known by the medium. The Martian word for "sun" is *arva*, and together with German *vier* (4), it may have contributed in producing the root *ivra* of *ivraïni* (*ini* being a frequently occurring suffix in Martian). Note moreover that the beginning *iv* of *ivra* denotes the number 4 in roman numerals. That is, *ivraïni* points at Sunday the 4th and Flournoy is right in fixing the vision on this day.

So it may be the name Leopoldine that induced the medium to exchange Victor Hugo for Leopold as a spirit guide.

11. Engels *et al.* 2003; Engels 2004.

12. Van Tieghem 1969, p. 192-193.

13. Juin 1980, p. 871-872.

14. Flournoy 1994, p. 147-148.

Marie and Mars

The sudden death in the Hugo family can be compared to the sudden death in the Müller family: the death of Marie Müller, when she was only three years old. The night before Marie's death the medium's mother had a vision about an angel standing with outspread hands near the cradle. Nearly the same vision our medium reports during her first visit to Mars: she sees an angel near a cradle with outstretched wings. This first vision was on the 25th of November 1894, on the feast day of Saint Catherine.

In 1932 Walter Deonna published parts of Héléne Smith's diary. Apparently she constantly feared that she would be killed, a fear that started somewhere between the age of 5 to 10¹⁵. Note that, when Marie Müller suddenly died, her sister Catherine, our medium, was seven years old. Invoking Saint Catherine, who protects against sudden death¹⁶, may have helped Catherine Müller in mastering her fear of death. Later on she seems to have fully forgotten Marie, as only two years before the medium's death, Christmas 1927, in a vision of the Virgin Mary she is reminded of her sister Marie¹⁷. Marie's death might be the trauma, lying at the base of the visions and language production of the medium, where Rutstein (1996) is looking for.

Final remarks

A subset of the 250 Martian words has been analyzed up till now, but the results seem to make sense¹⁸. There is no need for languages as Hungarian or even Sanskrit, used by Victor Henry to explain Martian. However a foreign language influencing Martian is German. This foreign language is present in her last name Müller.

The resemblance in structure of the glossolalia to Kraepelin's dream language may be explained by the resemblance of the dream state and the trance or hypnotic state, both alternative states of conscience. Languages produced in dream or trance, are mostly called imaginary languages¹⁹. Whereas Yaguello assumed a non-linguistic Ego producing the glossolalia, it may in fact be a subconscious part of the Ego, the set of code words, which is producing such a language, and a minimal linguistic aspect of the Ego, the proper name, may be the key to those languages.

Huub ENGELS²⁰

15. Deonna 1932, p. 16.

16. Mandouze 1987, p. 88.

17. Deonna 1932, p. 101.

18. Engels 2004, p. 152-166.

19. Yaguello 1984.

20. Doctor, Guest Researcher at Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics, Nijmegen, The Netherlands ; H.Engels@acsw.ru.nl.

Références bibliographiques

- BOBON (1952), *Introduction historique à l'étude des néologismes et des glossolalies en psychopathologie*, Paris, Masson.
- CIFALI M. (1988), "La fabrication du Martien : genèse d'une langue imaginaire", *Langages*, 23, 01, p. 39-60.
- DEONNA W. (1932), *De la planète Mars en terre sainte. Art et subconscient, un médium peintre : Hélène Smith*, Paris, E. de Boccard.
- ENGELS H., HEYNICK F. and STAAK C. van der (2003), "Emil Kraepelin's dream speech : a psychoanalytic interpretation", *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 84, p. 1281-1294.
- ENGELS H. (2004), *Gestoorde taal in de dromen van Emil Kraepelin*, PhD thesis. ISBN 90-6464-228-1 (full text on the internet : http://webdoc.ubn.ru.nl/mono/e/engels_h/gesttaind.pdf)
- FLOURNOY Th. (1900), *Des Indes à la Planète Mars, étude sur un cas de somnambulisme avec glossolalie*, Paris, Alcan ; rééd. Paris, Seuil, 1983.
- FLOURNOY Th. (1994), *From India to the Planet Mars. A case of multiple personality with imaginary languages*, Sonu Shamdasani (ed.), Princeton, Princeton University Press.
- HENRY V. (1901), *Le Langage martien*, Châlons-sur-Saône, Bertrand.
- HEYNICK F. (1993), *Language and its disturbances in dreams : the pioneering work of Freud and Kraepelin updated*, New York, Wiley.
- JUIN H. (1980), *Victor Hugo, 1802-1843*, Paris, Flammarion.
- KRAEPELIN E. (1906), *Über Sprachstörungen im Traume*, Leipzig, Wilhelm Engelmann.
- MANDOUZE A. (1987), *Histoire des saints et de la sainteté chrétienne*, t. II. Paris, Hachette.
- OIJEN B. van (1996), "Vowel mutability and lexical selection in English : Evidence from a word reconstruction task", *Memory and Cognition*, 24, p. 573-583.
- RUTSTEIN J.S. (1996), "The Psychological Origins of So-Called Supernatural Experience", *Contemporary Psychology*, 41, 8.
- VAN TIEGHEM Ph. (1969), *Dictionnaire de Victor Hugo*, Paris, Larousse.
- YAGUELLO M. (1984), *Les Fous du langage. Des langues imaginaires et de leurs inventeurs*, Paris, Seuil.