



Reverse Speech

Reverse speech is one of the areas of strange phenomena that even many extremely open-minded researchers of the unusual find hard to swallow. Essentially, the idea of reverse speech is this: hidden within the ordinary things we say is a deeper meaning - words and phrases spoken unconsciously that are revealed only when our recorded speech is played in reverse. The question is, are proponents of reverse speech just hearing what they want to hear or are they really on to something?

David John Oates, an Australian researcher, is most often credited with discovering the phenomenon; he's certainly responsible for coining the phrase "reverse speech" and for promoting it in books, in lectures and on his website, Reverse Speech.

Oates doesn't claim a paranormal origin for reverse speech, but rather believes it is a natural function of human communication that is present with us since birth. In fact, he believes that children speak backward before they learn to speak forward - only we hear it as infantile goo-goo. According to Oates, "human speech has two distinctive yet complementary functions and modes. The "overt" mode is spoken forwards and is primarily under conscious control. The "covert" mode is spoken backward and is not under conscious control. In the dynamics of interpersonal communication, both modes of speech combined communicate the total psyche of the person, conscious as well as unconscious."

Reverse speech, apparently, doesn't flow as readily as normal forward speech. When normal speech is played backward, only bits and pieces of reverse speech can be recognized about every 10 to 15 seconds, says Oates, in the form of a few words or short phrases.

Perhaps the most controversial aspect of reverse speech isn't that one can discern words and phrases within reversed speech, but in the claim that the backward speech unconsciously reveals the true feelings and intent of the speaker. "Reverse speech is the voice of truth," says Oates. In an article entitled "Reverse Speech Analysis," author Eve Frances Lorgen calls the phenomenon "the truth detector of the millennium" and says that it might place the polygraph as a lie detector. Lorgen uses reverse speech as an investigative and therapeutic tool for UFO abductees.

The "Evidence"

Naturally, Oates has plenty of reverse speech examples on his website, which you can listen to if you have a sound card and some kind of sound player like RealAudio or MediaPlayer. Most of

the examples are, not surprisingly, from celebrities. There are examples from the Clintons, presidential candidates, Mike Tyson, John Lennon, O.J. Simpson and even the parents of JonBenet Ramsey.

Many of the examples presented are easy to understand, while others require a bit more imagination. In fact, if Oates didn't have the reversed speech written out on the website, one might be hard-pressed to hear what he's hearing in some examples.

For instance, when in a press statement Patsy Ramsey says,

"We feel that there are at least two people on the face of the earth that know who did this and that is the killer and someone else that person may have confided in." ... what Oates says she's saying in reverse is pretty clear to hear:

"I'm that person. Seen that rape." On the other hand, with the Mike Tyson reversal when he is talking about his future in the boxing profession, Oates claims to hear:

"Money. Get our funds. I shall be rewarded." ... I think most listeners would find it very difficult to distinguish those phrases, even when the sound byte is played at very slow speed, without first reading Oates' interpretation.

Some interpreted reversals just don't seem to make sense, or don't live up to the "voice of truth" claim. In a reversal of Neil Armstrong's famous "That's one small step for man" declaration as he stepped on the surface of the moon, Oates hears:

"Man will space walk."

How does this translate as an unconscious truth? For one thing, astronauts and cosmonauts had already space walked many years earlier. What is it that Armstrong could have been trying to unconsciously convey with such a statement? Several of the other reversals are equally enigmatic.

Oates isn't the only one doing speech reversals, of course. Since he popularized it, many others have tried their hand at it.

At Encounters with the Unknown, Patricia Mason, a "reverse speech analyst," has been recording the experiences of people who claim to have been abducted by aliens. She listens to their reverse speech for subconsciously remembered details about their abduction experiences. The results are often pretty goofy. For example, when an abductee named Jody says, "And there's something in you that..." Mason hears in reverse: "Everything is not your net." Huh? It kind of sounds like that... but what on earth does that mean?

The Scientific Response

It's not surprising that the scientific community has been less than receptive to the idea of reverse speech. Unfortunately, when it comes to phenomena with such amazing claims as reverse speech, the scientific community tends to reject the idea out of hand, without any kind of scientific testing or investigation. But that begs the question: What kind of testing or experimentation would be required? Since the reversals seem to rely heavily on interpretation, how could the results be validated or verified?

Joan Allen says that reverse speech, in its language of metaphors, may be tapping into what Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung described as "the collective unconscious." But here again, when you

have a message made up of metaphors - much like dreams - the metaphors can be viewed and interpreted in countless ways.

What makes scientific testing difficult is the lack of consistency in what a reversal might mean. As Joan Allen writes in an essay on reverse speech:

"Within the rule of complementarity are multiple types of reversals.

1. The reversal may agree with the forward spoken words. This is congruency.
2. The reversal may add information to the forward speech. This is an expansive reversal.
3. The reversal may totally contradict the forward spoken words. This is a contradictory reversal.
4. The reversal may contain exactly the same words as the forward spoken words - a mirror reversal.
5. There is also a trailing reversal in which the reversal relates to words spoken forward that occurred prior to the words upon which the reversal actually occurs."

This it-can-mean-almost-anything nature of reverse speech makes it highly susceptible to interpretation.

Oates has conducted his own blind tests with a group of 30 individuals, reports "Reverse Speech Analysis":

"The group was divided into three sections: Group one was told what the reversal was and asked, 'Can you hear that?' Group two was told a false message that was not present and was asked, 'Can you hear that?' Group three was told nothing and asked, 'What do you hear?' The results from group one had an 80 percent recognition, group two less than 10 percent, and group three there was at least 50 percent recognition and even higher than 50 percent for those who were more trained in reverse speech. Furthermore, when several person's read the same paragraph, for example, about their mother, the tests showed that different reversals were found for each person. The content of the reversals indicated how the person felt or thought about their mother. It is in these detections of inner, often hidden feelings that supporters of reverse speech see its greatest potential benefit - and possibly eventual validation. Oates believes that it may not only be able to detect lies, it may also be able to uncover repressed traumatic memories. "I've done reversals on a woman who was molested as a child," he told Eve Lorgen, "yet had no conscious memory of the event. In her reversals she made graphic descriptions of the perpetrator. I've had people reveal names of relatives, bank accounts, hidden agendas and behaviors that were later confirmed by the individual."

Other experimenters also think reverse speech can even be used as a therapy. In the article Hidden Language, author Marc Iskovitz looks at the work of Dr. Karen Boone, OMD, PhD. - another reverse speech analyst and an acupuncturist – who uses it as "an alternative modality that can be used as an adjunct to other modes of therapy for a variety of problems, such as stuttering, insomnia and depression."

Just Hearing Things?

Can it be that the experimenters are hearing things simply because they want to hear things? Is the reverse speech phenomenon analogous to seeing the form of the Virgin Mary in a patch of tree bark or in the patterns on the side of a building? Just as our brains are conditioned to see familiar figures in random patterns, perhaps they also strive to hear words in random noise.

In an article titled "The Demon-Haunted Sentence: A Skeptical Analysis of Reverse Speech" in the Skeptical Inquirer, authors Tom Byrne and Matthew Normand describe an experiment conducted by American psychologist B.F. Skinner with a machine called the "verbal summator":

"The verbal summator consisted of a phonograph (or tape) of random vowel sounds that were grouped together in such a way as to not produce any systematic phonetic groupings. These random phonetic sounds were arranged into patterns that approximated common stress patterns in everyday conversation. After such strings of nonsense syllables were arranged, they were played for subjects at barely audible volume levels. After repeatedly listening to these sounds, subjects reported 'hearing' the phonograph or the tape 'say' things. These sentences, or sentence fragments, did not actually exist and, as such, were considered to be utterances that were already strong in the subject's repertoire. Put another way, they were 'projecting' their own thoughts onto the sounds they were hearing." To further prove this point and to demonstrate the heights of silliness such phenomena as reverse speech can reach, at the website [What is Bigfoot Talking About In Ohio?](#) a couple of Bigfoot investigators wonder if some recognizable English words can be heard in some recordings they say are of sounds made by the elusive creature. It would be interesting to know what Bigfoot is really feeling.