

Sensory Orders and Spiritual Speech: An Embodied Approach to Glossolalia

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THE ROOM IS FULL WHEN THE SOUNDS EMERGE, thickening and cacophonous as they collide with one another. Bodies are crammed, shoulder to shoulder, in the pews, and the humid air is warm from devotion and continuous prayer. The mingling scents of perfume, sweat, and anointing oil linger in the space, settling over the soft murmurs that will soon give rise to something louder. In the front, someone begins to tremble. The movements are slight at first, but culminate with a force that seems to rise through the spine. A woman falls backward, her limbs going slack as though overtaken by a sudden and unexpected weight; someone beside her sways in a slow, serpentine motion. Voices rise in layers: high cracking pitches pair with low rhythmic syllables and staccato bursts that begin with intelligible language but quickly dissolve into something incomprehensible to the human mind. Certain phonetic patterns repeat—faint “sha-la-la” or a clipped “da-da-ba”—but never resolve into anything recognizable. As it intensifies, the sound blurs from voice to vibration. It is something felt in the chest as much as it is heard through the ears. Other bodily sensations emerge, and the floorboards seem to hum beneath the stomping feet and shaking bodies. These resonances move outward from the crest of sound as more congregants take part. Caught in the midst of such sensory waves, participants report feeling overtaken, empowered, and “filled” by the Holy Spirit. This phenomenon is known as glossolalia, or “speaking in tongues”—a practice described as the spontaneous production of non-lexical, speech-like sounds that are nevertheless perceived by practitioners as language bestowed by the Holy Spirit rather than mere nonsense syllables.¹

Scenes like the one above characterized the 1906 Azusa Street Revival in Los Angeles, a historical moment widely recognized as the birth of global Pentecostalism.² Video evidence of modern services³—circulated widely online and on television—demonstrate similarly saturated atmospheres. Worshippers sway, weep, and collapse, all while weaving a web of tangled, swelling utterances and vocalizations.⁴ Although more than a century separates Azusa Street and the Holiness movement’s⁵ “coming of age”⁶ from today’s churches, the sensory profile of the glossolalic phenomenon remains remarkably consistent. In spite of these similarities, however, the meanings attached to these sensations differ vastly across historical contexts. To put it concisely: though the bodily experiences remain largely unchanged, the way worshippers understand these sensations has shifted dramatically.

Early Pentecostals overwhelmingly interpreted glossolalia as xenolalia—the miraculous, Spirit-

¹Philip E. Blosser and Charles A. Sullivan, *Speaking in Tongues: A Critical Historical Examination. Volume 1: The Modern Redefinition of Tongues* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2022), 23.

²Ibid., 63.

³“They Shall Speak with New Tongues,” YouTube video, 6:47, posted by Steve Assink, August 1, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wz9n4w97A9Q>.

⁴Here, I’d like to note that while this paper centers on communal glossolalia, it does not overlook private prayer tongues. Many Pentecostals take care to distinguish between corporate manifestations that shape a shared sensory experience and solitary practices that cater to the individual. The focus here remains on communal settings because they most clearly reveal how shared sensory environments shape interpretive frameworks over time.

⁵A nineteenth-century Protestant revival tradition emphasizing sanctification, spiritual purity, and direct encounters with the Holy Spirit.

⁶Blosser and Sullivan, *Speaking in Tongues: A Critical Historical Examination. Volume 1: The Modern Redefinition of Tongues*, 63.

granted ability to speak a previously unlearned human language for the purpose of evangelizing.⁷ Today, however, tongues are primarily conceptualized as a heavenly prayer language used to facilitate personal communion with God.⁸ As this historical trajectory comes into view, a central question emerges: What can be discerned about the senses as a mediator of divine presence when a sensory experience remains stable but its interpretation changes? Further, what role do the senses play in producing and stabilizing religious meaning? To situate these questions within a broader theoretical framework, it is useful to turn to sensory studies. Scholars like David Howes and Constance Classen articulate that the senses are never just biological givens. Their use and importance extends far beyond physiological characteristics. Instead, senses are organized into sensory orders, or shared ways of perceiving that allow communities to identify meaning in certain sounds, movements, and bodily states.⁹ Through this interpretive lens, sensation is no longer understood as raw data grounded purely in biological function; rather, it is shaped through cultural expectations, collective practices, and socially reinforced patterns of interpretation. Individuals are often subconsciously trained to recognize certain sensations as meaningful, thus learning to intuit what is of significance and what can be ignored. Religious communities, in particular, cultivate sensory orders that teach practitioners to interpret specific bodily and emotional experiences as signs of divine presence. In doing so, they develop repositories of feeling and perceiving that render the divine knowable, both in the body and in the world.

Viewed through the lens of sensory studies, glossolalia can be understood as a sensory practice whose embodied form at once generates and anchors religious meaning, and does so across time and space. The bodily sensations associated with glossolalic practice form a stable repertoire that believers consistently recognize as signs of the Holy Spirit's activity, leading to a sensorial base through which religious meaning is asserted. At Azusa Street, these sensations were interpreted as outward-facing evidence of missionary empowerment; in contemporary Pentecostalism, the very same sensations are positioned as inward-facing, intimate encounters with God. Across both settings, the body remains a site of religious knowledge. Practitioners begin with what they feel, and theological interpretations are subsequently reformulated to render those sensations coherent.

Although glossolalia is often framed solely in terms of speech, failing to acknowledge it as a multi-sensory event—one that goes beyond speech or hearing—would be a grave error. Most consistently, practitioners highlight how the glossolalic experience *feels* in the body, not just how it is heard. Common descriptions emphasize tongues as a phenomenon that “bubbles up,” “flows,” or “pours out” from one’s body, highlighting that the speech is not intentionally produced. Rather, it emerges from somewhere beyond the thinking brain. Its sonic structure, while rooted in some identifiable aspects of language, consists of rapid syllabic patterns, bursts of rhythm, and pitch variations that resemble emotive vocalizations more so than any intentional communication. These sounds coincide with distinct bodily sensations: trembling hands, heat in the chest, warmth spreading through limbs, crying, rapid breathing, and a sense of emotional release. One modern practitioner reports feeling “a gentle kind of electricity, kind of warming [their] tongue and lips,”¹⁰ while another Azusa member recalls being “shaken violently by a great power... [feeling like] a pump under terrific pressure, [being filled] with oil... [they] could feel the filling in [their] toes and all parts of [their] body” until the pressure was alleviated and they felt as though they were floating.¹¹ When speak-

⁷H. Newton Malony and A. Adams Lovekin, *Glossolalia: Behavioral Science Perspectives on Speaking in Tongues* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 24.

⁸Blosser and Sullivan, *Speaking in Tongues: A Critical Historical Examination. Volume 1: The Modern Redefinition of Tongues*, 36.

⁹David Howes and Constance Classen, *Ways of Sensing: Ways and Meanings* (London: Routledge, 2013), 12.

¹⁰William J. Samarin, “Making Sense of Glossolalic Nonsense,” *Social Research* 46, no. 1 (1979): 93, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40970362>.

¹¹“The Apostolic Faith Vol. I, No. 3 (Los Angeles: Apostolic Faith Movement of Los Angeles, November 1906),” <https://objectstorage.us-phoenix-1.oraclecloud.com/n/ax22fojcamx7/b/PDFs/o/Historical%2FAzusa->

ing in tongues, some sway or rock while others fall or collapse, describing themselves as “slain in the Spirit.”¹² Frequently, these experiences feel involuntary. The body goes beyond the individual, becoming a site through which divine presence is both felt and expressed. Secondary observers, or those not speaking in tongues, also report sensations like tingling, heaviness, or emotional pressure, all of which further indicate that glossolalia contributes to a shared sensorium, or a collectively experienced sensory environment through which participants experience divine presence.¹³

To understand how glossolalia initially acquired its sensory and theological significance within Pentecostalism, the Azusa Street Revival warrants closer examination. Led by William J. Seymour, a Black Holiness preacher, the revival united practitioners across racial and class divides for worship, prayer, healing, and baptism in the Spirit. Speaking in tongues was regarded as the paramount sign of successful Spirit baptism, and participants almost uniformly interpreted their “utterances” as xenolalic.¹⁴ Informing this belief, Seymour drew from Charles Parham’s reading of Acts 2 and 1 Corinthians 12–14, which framed tongues as human languages granted by the Spirit for evangelization.¹⁵ *The Apostolic Faith*—Seymour’s newsletter—regularly portrayed the revival’s overwhelming sensory atmosphere and its missionary calling as mutually reinforcing. In its October 1906 issue, the editors described a “heavenly atmosphere” in which “people [were] slain under the power of God,” the altar crowded with seekers and worshippers overcome by tears, trembling, and eruptive praise.¹⁶ Only a few paragraphs later, the newsletter announced that missionaries “equipped with several languages” were already departing for foreign fields, while others were waiting for God to open the way.¹⁷ The overwhelming bodily upheaval that filled the mission did not function merely to embellish or provide color to a narrative; rather, it served as central proof that the Spirit was actively distributing linguistic gifts that would prepare ordinary people for missionary work. Through this framing, we observe that the sensory environment became inseparable from the broader theological claims—sensation itself became the evidence for the missionary vision.

What propelled this evangelical ambition was not simply a matter of enthusiasm or misinterpretation. Stories circulated of immigrants recognizing their native languages in the tongues spoken during worship services.¹⁸ Whether such tales were accurate or shaped by collective enthusiasm, they nevertheless primed worshippers to interpret bodily sensations in xenolalic terms. Here, sensation worked to confirm belief, and belief then prepared the senses to notice divine movement in even the slightest of bodily shifts. The sensory field thus oriented the community outward: the bodily force of Spirit baptism was interpreted not as private devotion but as evidence of a calling that extended beyond Los Angeles. One testimony from *The Apostolic Faith* captures this convergence of sensation, language, and vocation:

...I received the baptism with the Holy Ghost and fire and now I feel the presence of the Holy Ghost, not only in my heart but in my lungs, my hands, my arms and all through my body and at times I am shaken like a locomotive steamed up and prepared for a long journey...I also speak in six foreign tongues given me at God’s command.

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¹²Felicitas D. Goodman, *Speaking in Tongues: A Cross-Cultural Study of Glossolalia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972), 6.

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Gastón Espinosa and Harvey Cox, *William J. Seymour and the Origins of Global Pentecostalism: A Biography and Documentary History* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv11cvzs4>, 57.

¹⁵Based on such analyses, early Pentecostals believed they were reliving the Day of Pentecost, when the apostles reportedly spoke in languages understood by foreigners.

¹⁶“The Apostolic Faith Vol. I, No. 2 (Los Angeles: Apostolic Faith Movement of Los Angeles, November 1906),” <https://objectstorage.us-phoenix-1.oraclecloud.com/n/axx22fojcamx7/b/PDFs/o/Historical%2FAzusa-Paper-02.pdf>.

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸Ibid.

God has called me to Africa as a missionary, and told me to go to Monrovia, Liberia.¹⁹

Here, trembling limbs and tongues integrate seamlessly into the certainty of a global mission. The distinct bodily manifestations of Spirit baptism were not reduced to emotional excess; rather, they were perceived as corporeal confirmation and teleological signs that the Spirit was equipping worshippers with authentic foreign languages for evangelizing purposes.

Believers thus traveled in large swaths to Asia, Africa, and the Middle East, carrying with them the expectation that the languages “given at God’s command” would function intelligibly abroad.²⁰ Once they arrived, however, many discovered that their Spirit-given tongues did not correspond to any known human language. This realization triggered an interpretive crisis: “Many went to the mission field only to find that they didn’t in fact speak the language,” and some left the movement altogether in the face of this dissonance.²¹ Yet others, rather than rejecting the experience entirely, merely reconfigured its meaning. Alfred and Lillian Garr, a pair of influential missionaries, began to place more emphasis on Paul’s teachings in 1 Corinthians. Instead of insisting that glossolalia must be intelligible human speech, they cited Paul’s assertion that “those who speak in a tongue speak not to men but to God,”²² arguing that tongues were a “divine language known only to God.”²³ By reframing the experience in Pauline terms, they were able to preserve its legitimacy while simultaneously severing it from expectations of evangelism. Strikingly, throughout the crisis, the sensations themselves were never questioned. Missionaries interrogated their theological assumptions, but not the reality of what they felt. The trembling and heat, the Spirit “flood[ing one’s] whole being... enlarg[ing one’s] heart” and the “glory and power that seemed to rush in... like water poured out”²⁴ were too vivid and too somatically convincing to dismiss as error or imagination. Even as its meaning had to be rebuilt, the sensory core of glossolalia remained intact. Here, sensation proved more stable than doctrine, and it was ultimately the persistence of embodied experience that encouraged reinterpretation rather than abandonment.

The interpretive crisis faced by early Pentecostals led to a shift in meaning that was inherited by contemporary Pentecostal and Charismatic churches. Today, glossolalia is almost universally understood as a prayer language—a direct conduit to God that “bypasses” intelligible speech.²⁵ This inward-facing interpretation contrasts sharply with the outward orientation at Azusa, yet the embodied features of the practice remain remarkably similar. Mirroring early sensory reports, William Samarin’s later ethnographic research documents believers who felt “something very strange going on in [their] throat” immediately before tongues broke loose, and a sensation “in [their] jaw and tongue” that signaled a transition from ordinary speech to Spirit-guided utterances.²⁶ Glossolalia’s sonic structure also remains consistent: rhythmic syllables and repeated clusters, cascading vocal patterns, and speech that “pours out” without any intentional articulation.²⁷ A detailed case study by Margaret Poloma and John Hood further illustrates the enduring characteristics manifest in the contemporary sensory frame. Their interview with “April,” a congregant at a

¹⁹“The Apostolic Faith Vol. I, No. 4 (Los Angeles: Apostolic Faith Movement of Los Angeles, November 1906),” <https://objectstorage.us-phoenix-1.oraclecloud.com/n/ax22fojcamx7/b/PDFs/o/Historical%2FAzusa-Paper-04.pdf>.

²⁰Espinosa and Cox, *William J. Seymour and the Origins of Global Pentecostalism: A Biography and Documentary History*, 87.

²¹*Ibid.*, 89.

²²1 Cor. 14:2.

²³Espinosa and Cox, *William J. Seymour and the Origins of Global Pentecostalism: A Biography and Documentary History*, 89.

²⁴“The Apostolic Faith, Vol. I, No. 4.”

²⁵Samarin, “Making Sense of Glossolalic Nonsense,” 95.

²⁶*Ibid.*, 92.

²⁷Margaret M. Poloma and John C. Green, “Spirit Baptism and Spiritual Transformation: An Exercise in Socio-Theology,” in *The Assemblies of God: Godly Love and the Revitalization of American Pentecostalism* (New York: NYU Press, 2010), 112.

Neo-charismatic²⁸ Vineyard church, describes a Spirit baptism that begins with an overwhelming bodily sensation—"the presence of God come on me so strong"—long before she could articulate its meaning. She recalled a wave of emotional and physical intensity she simply called her "manifestations."²⁹ During worship, April learned that tongues were the primary sign of Spirit baptism, and she interpreted various bodily sensations during worship in accordance with those teachings. Over time, she integrated her bodily experiences with theology, learning to see tongues as signs of a "heavenly language" meant for intimate prayer.³⁰

The communal worship environment continues to play a crucial role in shaping these experiences. Poloma and Hood describe services where congregants pray "loudly, often with sobs and wailing," creating a multisensory field of sound, motion, and emotion that echoes the frenetic atmospheres reported at Azusa.³¹ As seen in the early revival, glossolalia tends to move collectively: one person begins, another responds, and the room is gradually painted with layers of sound, trembling bodies, and a generally heightened affect. Within this sensorial field, many worshippers describe feeling as though they are drawn toward the same "break" into tongues.³²

The moment when one goes from intentional articulation to spontaneous utterance is felt as a kind of surrender, and it remains the central marker of divine presence. However, as we have seen, the meaning of these sensations has been fundamentally reoriented. This interpretive shift reveals a significant theological reorientation within Pentecostalism while simultaneously highlighting the deeper sensory continuity underlying glossolalia across time. The bodily intensity that shaped the early revival remains just as compelling for modern worshippers. What shifted, then, was not the sensory essence of the experience, but the interpretive framework built around it. Sensation comes first, and meaning follows; theology adjusts to what the body insists is real.

Returning to the framework of sensory studies helps clarify why glossolalia remained stable even as its theological interpretation shifted. The continuity of embodied experience across generations reveals a distinct Pentecostal sensory order that categorizes certain sensations, shaking, tears, eruptive speech, and emotional intensity, as spiritually significant. Azusa participants learned through practice, testimony, and the charged environment of the revival to recognize certain bodily states as signs of Spirit baptism. Contemporary worshippers inherit many of these same somatic expectations, even as the theological explanations attached to them have changed. Sensory orders thus work as conveyors of tradition and legacy. Bodies today continue to feel and sense what was felt and sensed by earlier bodies. These sensations allow for continuity even as surrounding conceptual frameworks evolve. This perspective also sheds light on why reinterpretation, rather than abandonment, followed the collapse of xenolalic expectations. Sensed experiences leave residues that the body can recall long after the moment has passed, making them challenging to erase entirely.

This, paired with the contrast between Azusa Street and contemporary glossolalic practice, brings into view two further insights. First, Pentecostal epistemology operates from the ground up, so to speak. That is, sensory experiences anchor belief, and theological interpretations are amended when they no longer adequately account for what the body reliably provides. Early missionaries who discovered that their tongues did not function xenolalically did not forsake the sensations; instead, leaders like Seymour reframed tongues as a divine, nonhuman language. The instinct to protect the integrity of the sensation by revising its theological explanation reveals how worshippers begin with what they feel, not what they are told to believe. Second, and perhaps more

²⁸Unlike classical Pentecostal denominations, which emerged directly from the early revivals and typically emphasize doctrines such as Spirit baptism, Neo-charismatic movements are more loosely organized and often exist within independent churches or non-Pentecostal denominations while still emphasizing charismatic gifts and direct experiences of the Holy Spirit.

²⁹*Ibid.*, 107.

³⁰*Ibid.*, 108.

³¹*Ibid.*, 113.

³²*Ibid.*, 119.

importantly, the senses are conceptualized differently across various historical moments. Sound, touch, and bodily awareness mediated divine presence in both settings, but their function changed in response to external circumstances. This shift reflects a few key insights from sensory studies. Sensations are, evidently, physiological; more than that, however, sensations are culturally mediated and thus organized around shared narratives. To maintain stability, communities must ensure that their sensory worlds remain coherent—consistency across both personal experiences and collective knowledge is crucial. As such, when external circumstances destabilize a prior interpretation, only the meaning of the senses is reoriented, not the experience itself, which allows the sensation to remain accessible and spiritually trustworthy.

Attempting to trace glossolalia from the packed pews of the Azusa Street Mission to the multisensory worship environments of contemporary Pentecostal churches reveals a tradition held together less by doctrinal uniformity than by the persistence of sensation. The trembling limbs, rising heat, and eruptive speech that filled Seymour's revival meetings still emerge in modern prayer. What has changed is not what the body does, but rather how communities make sense of those same bodily cues. Early Pentecostals read their sensations as signs of an outward-facing directive—evidence that God was equipping ordinary believers to spread the Christian faith across the globe. Contemporary practitioners decipher those same sensations as invitations to interact with God: they are expressions of intimacy, emotional release, and divine nearness. Approaching glossolalia through sensory studies helps to clarify why this continuity matters: communities do not merely sense the world; rather, they learn to sense it in particular and meaningful ways. Through repeated ritual performance, Pentecostals generated a collective sensory order rooted in shared bodily expectations that encoded glossolalia as a recognizable marker of the Holy Spirit. Glossolalia thus demonstrates how religious traditions, rituals, and practices endure—they do not rely solely on texts or doctrine, but rather on the stability of embodied experience and a shared sensorium that allows communities to recognize, sense, and connect with the sacred.

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