



The Skeptics SA guide to Reverse Speech

Reverse Speech (RS) is claimed to be ‘the amazing phenomenon of a hidden language that is imbedded backwards into the sounds of our speech.’¹ Proponents of RS claim that what we perceive as speech is really a ‘two fold’ process, and that in addition to normal, or Forward Speech (FS), there is another verbal level of communication, one that is the reverse of FS, namely RS!

Since 1984 the theories behind RS have been developed by Australian David John Oates, who has invested considerable time, energy and finance into promoting this particular theory: so much so that he admits ‘my little hobby had turned into an obsession.’² Over some twenty or so years of his obsession with RS he has developed a number of quite startling theories, for instance he claims that:

- ...the process of spoken communication is two fold, forwards and backwards. As the human brain is constructing the sounds of speech, it is putting those sounds together in such a way that two messages are communicated simultaneously, one forwards from the conscious mind and the other in reverse from the unconscious mind³
- RS occurs approximately once every 15 – 20 seconds of normal relaxed conversation⁴

- RS ... acts almost like an ultimate truth detector... It can reveal the guilt or innocence of a suspect... reveal the location of missing evidence and the motives for a crime⁵
- if a lie was spoken in forward speech the backwards speech would often correct that lie and speak the truth instead⁶
- if pertinent facts were left out of the forward speech, the backward speech would often put them in⁷
- Children commence using RS early in life ‘with single words being detected as early as four months, then, as forward speech begins the two modes of speech gradually combine into one⁸
- Oates’ confidence in RS is quite extraordinary: he describes it as ‘The 7th Sense’—... an awesome discovery that has the potential to revolutionize our understanding of how the human mind works, and possibly bring society into an age of truth and awareness⁹

He perceives RS as a multifaceted tool, one that offers fast and efficient treatment solutions in areas as diverse as child psychology, psychological therapy, behavioural therapy, self improvement, counselling, personal relationships, physical and educational diffi-

culties and criminology. He even claims that RS provides not only a means of opening up channels of communication with children who are so severely retarded or autistic that normal means of verbal communication are impossible, but also that RS can enable individuals to gain access to their higher level of self, their actual soul.

In what appears to be a quite hazardous application of his theories, Oates promotes RS as a therapeutic tool. Operating on the belief that some 90% of RS originates in the unconscious level of the mind, he proposes that since RS originates in this area, it has the potential to ‘often reveal information unknown to the conscious mind. This can prove to be extremely beneficial in working with psychological or physical illness¹⁰. In one instance he claims that he ‘found a reversal that said “I have been molested.”’¹¹ Such an indiscriminate approach to therapy has a number of inherent problems. Given the seriousness of such claims, and their potential to lead to serious personal trauma, destroy relationships, and even possibly to lead to criminal charges, one must consider the validity of their origins.

The fact is that Oates is using what is nothing more than an arbitrary collection of the

words spoken by an individual, then reversing them to obtain a random collection of abstract sounds, and, should it eventuate that some of these appear similar to recognizable words, they are then 'interpreted' in such a way as to give them a meaningful connotation. Of course a principal danger is that in these types of situations the 'therapist' is far from being objective: they have a specific mind-set, and are actively seeking 'clues', and, given their heightened level of expectancy it is extremely likely that they will hear recognizable words or phrases.

However, in spite of the complex RS rigmarole, Oates admits these insights are not always easily gained, for many of the messages obtained through RS 'were a mystery to me'¹² Undaunted by such problems Oates conveniently identifies these mysterious messages as metaphors, so now, rather than revealing the problem outright, the therapist then has to go through the process of translating the metaphors. To assist practitioners Oates sells a dictionary of reverse speech metaphors and a whole new form of treatment, *Metaphor Restructuring*.¹³

Oates proposes that RS offers an explanation for 'many aspects of human intuition, why we often get a gut feeling when talking to someone that they can or cannot be trusted.' He attributes this to our unconscious recognition of reversed messages, yet, in fact there is nothing mystical about such feelings. It is well known that some 80 – 85% of human communication is non-verbal, and that 'gut-feelings'

about people is a well-known and understood cognitive process, so there is no need to have to resort to RS to explain such feelings.

When human speech is played in reverse, because the basic sound patterns are also reversed, most of the sounds tend to be almost unrecognizable. However, it is a fact that, even when reversed, some sounds are recognizable, however, there is no evidence to support Oates claims that they occur, 'approximately once every 15 – 20 seconds.'¹⁴ If one listens to long pieces of speech in reverse it is very likely that occasionally recognizable sounds may be heard, either as words or as what appear to be several words in sequence. However, the reason they are heard and recognized in this fashion is due to the remarkable ability of the human brain to make sense of the most obscure, random patterns of sound. Who has not heard what sounds like human voices as a train rattles along the track, or in the howling of the wind?

Such examples of auditory misperception are common. They have been recognized for thousands of years, and, in ancient times such sounds were known as Nature's voice; indeed the whistling wind, the rustling and creaking of trees in the forest, and the calls of animals and birds, were once believed to be forms of communication, warning them of imminent danger. The Romans believed these warnings came from elemental nature spirits, while David (2 Samuel 5:24) interpreted the rustling of the trees as a message from God revealing the location of the Philistine forces.

These sounds were often used as a form of divination and the Uape Indians of Brazil, in a process known as Paxaibu, interpret sounds made by the trembling leaves of palm trees as a guide to the future. One of the more bizarre examples of auditory divination was Gastro-mancy whereby the rumbling sounds coming from the belly were interpreted as having significant meanings. It is possible that RS is really nothing more than a modern form of auditory divination: RS appears remarkably similar to Shell Hearing, a form of divination popular in China and Asia. In response to a given question, the diviner would place a large conch shell to their ear and listen for sounds within the shell: these were then interpreted as a divine form of guidance. As in most forms of divination there was always a degree of compulsion for the diviner to obtain a suitable answer to the question being considered: this inevitably led to the diviner obtaining results, even if they had to do some cheating by (a) pretending they actually heard a message in the shell, and (b) that the answer was appropriate to the question.

At a public lecture (27 October 2003) Oates expressed his extreme disappointment that so few professionals take his work seriously, however he appears to be unwilling to accept evidence suggesting that the theories underlying RS are unsound. Skinner (1936)¹⁵ investigated somewhat similar auditory patterns. He used a phonograph to record a selection of random vowel sounds in such a way that there were no regular phonetic combinations. When these abstract sounds were played constantly

at a low volume, subjects reported hearing recognizable words or groups of words. In another experiment when Vokey and Reid (1985)¹⁶ played recordings of words spoken in reverse, subjects had extreme difficulty in identifying the various words. This would suggest that subjects may need some preparation or prompting to assist them to identify such sounds, a practice that, as detailed below, Oates seems to commonly use when teaching his theories.

More recently RS has also been examined: in a study by linguists Newbrook and Curtain (1997)¹⁷ some of the claims made by Oates about RS were tested using several groups:

- a) Group A was given a list of the six RS statements claimed to be audible in the recordings
- b) Group B was given a list of phrases that were different from the ones claimed to be audible in the reversed recordings
- c) Group C were not given any list of phrases but were told there were identifiable phrases in each of the reversed recordings and were asked to listen for these phrases
- d) Group D were not given any list of phrases, neither were they told that there were identifiable phrases in each of the reversed recordings; they were simply told that there might be.

Participants in Group A recorded the largest number of hits; those in Group B recorded a higher score than Groups C and D. Overall, the results appear to confirm that RS has no

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factual scientific basis and 'that the power of suggestion is an important factor in the recognition of RS sequences.¹⁸ The observation that suggestion played an important role in recognition of RS supported the conclusions reached independently by the author when he attended the October 2003 public lecture on RS.

It was noted that Mr Oates always prompted the audience beforehand as to what words or phrases would be heard on the reversed recordings he was about to play. The audience appeared genuinely amazed on hearing that the reversed material was exactly the same as Mr Oates had previously suggested they would hear. On the other hand the author found most of the examples incomprehensible gibberish and that only a few examples sounded similar to what Oates had previously suggested would be heard on the recording.

One objective of RS appears to be primarily financial: Oates offers training courses for aspiring RS analysts (\$2,195.00 for eight weekends) who will also need cassette players that can reverse speech, \$395 – \$495.

The outline of the training¹⁹ suggests that students are heavily conditioned to form a mind-set that will enable them to readily hear RS. This is a common psychological ploy, and in this instance, by constantly exposing students to a selection of reversed auditory material, and encouraging them to intentionally seek coherent sound patterns in the midst of the abstract noise, individuals tend to develop an ability to hear recognizable sounds in the midst of random noise.

The manner in which RS operates can be easily explained by comparing it to the manner in which birds mimic human speech. Many birds have a remarkable ability to copy sounds. Wild birds copy the calls of other birds and animals, while pet birds tend to mimic the speech of humans, especially regularly repeated words or phrases. However, while human speech is formed by an intentional interaction between the brain, the tongue and the larynx to communicate specific messages, birds simply mimic certain sounds. The fact that these appear to be recognizable words or phrases is purely accidental.

There are many problems with the claims made for RS. Communication skills, both spoken and unspoken, are among the most important abilities possessed by humans: these skills have been honed over millions of years to assist human survival in a hostile environment. One must ask then what role RS would have served in the distant past when these skills were developing. Unable to translate RS without specialized equipment it would have been a useless form of communication with no place in evolution. On this basis alone the entire concept of RS is outlandish: human skills evolve as they are used and perfected, they do not lie dormant for millions of years awaiting technology to enable humans to access them.

Oates claim that RS is already present in infants, (from Latin *infans*, literally meaning 'without speech') contradicts all known studies of child development and suggests the existence of an area of brain activity that remains

hidden from modern science. In fact children do not develop true verbal communication skills until their third year, when they discover the inherent power of language: it is the time when, much to the annoyance of their parents, they discover they can say 'No!'

Although Oates claims that patterns of RS are extremely common, with over twenty years of recording RS, one would expect that in this time he would have accumulated a vast selection of examples of RS, yet evidence suggests that he has not been able to do so, but instead relies on a very limited number of examples of RS.

For instance, the RS material presented at his public meeting appears to consist primarily of the same reversals he mentioned in his 1996 book, some of it from his 1963 recordings. In all fairness, one must ask, why does he not have anything new to present as evidence?

References

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- 6 Oates, 2003, *ibid.* p 2
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- 9 Oates, 2003, *ibid.* p 4
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- 11 Oates 2003, *ibid.* p 3
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- 17 Newbrook, M, and Curtain, J, 1997, 'Oates' theory of Reverse Speech: a critical examination', *Skeptic*, 17:3, pp 40–44
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