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Reverse Speech

Everyone knows Neil Armstrong's famous first words on the moon. But did you know that they say something else when played backwards? Armstrong's words, "That's one small step for man" reverses to say, "Man will space walk." This is a reflection of his logical thoughts at the time. Man will continue to walk into space.

(davidoates.com)

David Oates discovered the phenomenon of reverse speech (RS). This is the theory that regular speech contains hidden messages that can only be heard when it is played backwards. It is believed that unconscious thoughts, memories, and experiences are embedded in our spoken language, and we can reveal these by recording speech and playing it in reverse (Oates, 1991). This is backmasking without a soundtrack.

The theory of reverse speech

Oates claims that RS occurs every 10–15 seconds of speech, producing two messages simultaneously. The "overt mode" is spoken forwards and is heard consciously, while the "covert mode" is not under our conscious control, and is only heard when speech is played backwards. These two modes of speech are dependent upon each other and cannot be fully understood in isolation. When combined, they communicate the total psyche of the person, both conscious as well as subconscious.

We don't always say what we really think, whether we conceal our thoughts deliberately or we communicate ineffectively. According to Oates, RS breaks down the communication barriers that language creates. Oates believes that RS is invariably honest and he promotes it as the "ultimate lie detector". The human mind is no longer private. If a lie is spoken forwards, the truth will be spoken backwards.

RS is touted as a linguistic truth serum that reveals intention and motivation. It can be used as an interrogative tool for police and courts, to reveal the guilt or innocence of a suspect. It will coax an offender to confess, point to the evidence, and expose any accomplices. By analyzing RS, the media can examine political speeches for falsehoods, and employers can evaluate job candidates. Doctors can accurately diagnose their patients, while RS can also be used as a tool in child psychology, behavioral therapy, and self-improvement. If the claims made about RS could be proven, it would be a groundbreaking discovery with many practical applications.

Oates isn't a linguist or a psychologist. He discovered RS by accident in 1983, when he dropped a cassette tape into a toilet. He fished it out of the bowl and cleaned it, but found that the damaged tape only played in reverse. Strangely, Oates could still hear language, but these messages seemed to have a different meaning to the normal speech. He was likely inspired by the backmasking craze of the previous two decades, but Oates insists that backmasking is intentional whereas RS is unintentional.

An Australian by birth, Oates spent most of the 1990s living in California, promoting his theory via books, lectures, workshops, and counseling. Oates once pushed "reversing machines", which were basically tape players that could play in reverse. However, with the advent of digital recorders, most software programs can play recordings backwards. Today, there are many "RS practitioners" who are qualified by Oates' courses. Advocates claim that the theory works with all natural languages, and there are practitioners who perform RS analysis in Dutch, Spanish, and French.

Out of the mouths of babes

Oates believes that covert speech develops before overt speech, and that children speak backwards before they speak forwards. He claims that children as young as four months old produce single words in reverse, such as "Daddy", "hungry", and "help". He cites examples of a four-month-old child whose vocalizations played backwards say, "Mommy, Mommy". However, these noises don't constitute language, especially when played in reverse. The babbling stage begins at approximately 5-8 months, when the baby's vocalizations begin to sound like phonemes, but these do not yet represent meaning. At the end of the first year, babbles begin to sound like words. Even then, they may not have any specific meaning attached to them.