

## Oates' theory of Reverse Speech: an update

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### Summary of original paper (*the Skeptic* 17:3):

David Oates claims to have discovered a language phenomenon which he has labelled Reverse Speech (RS). According to Oates, during speech two messages are communicated simultaneously: one forwards and heard and responded to consciously, and the other (RS) in reverse and heard and responded to unconsciously. RS can allegedly be heard as clear, grammatical statements mixed in amongst gibberish.

The content of reversals is nearly always related to the forward dialogue, and often accentuates the forward speech. It also reveals unspoken thoughts which may be in contradiction to forward speech; therefore, it can be an effective tool to discover unspoken truths.

Oates conducted an experiment which produced results suggesting that untrained listeners are able to hear RS. This experiment was replicated by the authors and the results - as well as Oates' many naive claims regarding language - suggest that RS is illusory.

### Victorian Skeptics and academic colleagues get a taste of Reverse Speech

We have presented our material on RS on a number of occasions: at a Monash Linguistics staff seminar in late 1997; at a Victorian Skeptics talk in May 1998 at Asti's restaurant in Carlton, and at the Applied Linguistics Association of Australia conference in Brisbane in July 1998. To our delight, the audiences have been very appreciative of our investigations, and helpful with their comments.

### David Oates and Art Bell

An American contact sent us a tape of Art Bell's interview with David Oates. It was claimed that the reversals on the tape were especially clear; many of them purportedly related to NASA's alleged interest in the now debunked 'Face on Mars'.

We found these reversals no clearer than Oates' original favourite reversals, and in some cases ludicrously unclear. Oates again tells his listeners in advance what they should expect to hear.

### Talking backwards on the web

Our work on RS has attracted much attention on the web. We have accessed a .wav file of examples of RS to which our attention was drawn by an American RS enthusiast. Of the four examples, only one appeared to us to contain anything remotely intelligible, and that one was already known to us because it appears repeatedly on Oates' tapes. Our familiarity with it obviously contributed to our ability to hear it; on the other hand, it is one of the rare cases where a reversed sequence in English genuinely does resemble a corresponding forward sequence, albeit only four syllables in length: it is Bob Dole's reversal 'It's an honour'. Nothing intelligible could be heard in the other three examples. We were not entirely sure

whether they were regarded by our contact as containing 'genuine' RS, and indeed, in accordance with his wishes, we have refrained from posting our results to the relevant website, at least until others have had a chance to analyse the examples.

### Other Reverse Speech websites

On several websites and chat lines, etc, Oates has been publicly accusing us of being both wrong and fraudulent. Naturally we have responded to these accusations; his criticisms of our experiment appear confused and unfounded. Oates has also unreasonably accused us of not responding to his 'rebuttal' of our paper, which had been posted to a website of which we were originally unaware. In our response we noted that he could easily have contacted us directly at any time if he really wanted our comments.

More recently, our attention was drawn to a cluster of websites associated with the *Reverse Speech Newsletter* and DORSA (David Oates Reverse Speech Alliance). Oates' son and another RS devotee in Gippsland are trying to set up a chapter of DORSA in Victoria. Neither of them appreciated our attempts at dialogue. A DORSA member in England posted a request for information about linguists and psychologists interested in RS on the DORSA bulletin board, and we responded, directing readers to our paper. This too was not appreciated, and we have been abused by Oates and others for several crimes of which we are innocent, notably dishonesty, deception, issuing threats of legal action, writing in a style exhibiting "a trace of that up-right up-tight uncommitted and enigmatic sort of scholarly stink", sitting on a "self created paper throne", showing "blatant disrespect" of Oates and his theories, misrepresenting him in various ways and being insulting and rude to both him and his son. The *RS Newsletter* editor also suggested that we should be reported to Monash for writing to Oates Junior as we did. We were completely puzzled (but quite amused) by these accusations but we posted a final response summarising our position, defending ourselves and lamenting the unscholarly and nasty tone of the site. On the other hand, we have been pleased to receive some positive feedback on the web as a result of this correspondence.

### A Reverse Speech devotee right under our noses

One of our Monash Students (to our alarm) presented himself as an RS devotee, and asked us to listen to a tape which supposedly contained a three-syllable reversal of his own speech. The quality of the tape was so bad that the forwards speech was barely intelligible, and the alleged reversal (for which we were not prompted) proved utterly unconvincing. Needless to say, we strongly encouraged this student to read some critical literature (including our own) on the subject.

## Publications, fringe:

One of DORSA's two local members, Lynn Willmott, announced on the web that she was writing an article for *Spiritual Links* magazine. We noted that she has already published a ludicrously uncritical piece on the Face on Mars in the same journal, and we alerted the editors in Geelong to the dubious status of the RS theory. To our surprise (and delight) they have subsequently decided not to publish Lynn's article on RS.

Michael Oates (David Oates' 18 year old son) has recently published an article on RS in the magazine *Exposure*, which advocates fringe belief systems and conspiracy theories. However, this article was apparently (at least in part) written by David Oates. The persona of the writer changes quite dramatically between the first and the second pages - unless this 18 year old has been studying RS since the age of six, has been living in California for a number of years, and has raised twin daughters as a "single dad". Towards the end of the article, the persona switches back to Oates Junior. Amusingly, Oates Junior announced his publication on the website, and Oates Senior praised him for his outstanding efforts. We were surprised that the editor had not noticed the anomalies, and we pointed them out to him.

*Exposure* printed our letter but, once again, made major editing errors. The letter was clearly from both of us but was attributed only to Jane. Furthermore, the editor did not acknowledge that there had been any misrepresentation. We wrote again pointing out these mistakes.


## Mutiny on the RS Bounty

We have noticed with some amusement that recently the RS organisations (including DORSA) have met with a series of major problems: (1) "BJ", the DORSA president, has resigned after a major financial dispute with David Oates; (2) Karen Boone, Oates' fiancée and greatest advocate, has broken off the engagement and has resigned from the RS organisation; (3) According to Oates, the RS organisation is currently in "survival mode" financially. Is it too much to hope that this is the beginning of the end for David Oates and Reverse Speech?

## Reverse Speech hits the academic press

We are pleased to announce that a new version of our paper, intended for linguists and forensic linguists, has been accepted for publication in the peer-reviewed journal *Forensic Linguistics*.

## Concluding comments

Despite all the claims of Oates and his devotees, the verdict on RS must remain negative unless much better evidence can be produced. It has still not been shown that independent analysts (as opposed to Oates' swooning students) can hear reversals without prompting. There is also no evidence that Oates or others can obtain from samples of RS (without access to the corresponding forwards speech) any specific information which they could not obtain by orthodox means. Oates' use of RS in counselling and in the legal domain, and the commercial nature of his enterprise, continue to trouble us - as does his ignorance of basic linguistics, surely most unfortunate in one proposing a radically new theory of language. 

## ... Race from p 14

### 7. *r* and *K*.

Ecologists have argued for over thirty years whether the *r-K* distinction is really valid. It is perhaps valuable, if one realises that it is an oversimplification. But when all is said and done, it is a concept of evolutionary ecology. Rushton's use of the concept entirely misses the ecological connection: for him it concerns entirely "progress"; *K*-selected means "more evolved", for are not humans the most *K*-selected of all mammals? Hence, Mongoloids (with Caucasoids not far behind) are "more evolved" than Negroids. Actually, it is a model of density-dependant natural selection. The idea is that in an unpredictable environment there will be bad times, with episodes of mass mortality, and reproductive rates will need to be high so that the population can take advantage of the good times and "bounce back" quickly (*r*); in a stable environment a population will conserve its resources by breeding slowly, and a high proportion of those born will survive (*K*). That's all - no inference of "more" or "less" evolved.

In Rushton's claims, like those of any pseudoscientist, we find correct statements jumbled up with half-truths and total inaccuracies, and without detailed analysis we'd never be able to tell which is which; once a pseudoscientist gets the bit between his teeth everything is interpreted in a single-minded (and simple-minded) fashion and what doesn't fit gets swept away out of sight. Now there may be a genetic basis to differences in maturation rates, or fertility, between people, even between whole populations; there may even be a genetic basis to mental differences. But one cannot find out whether there is or not by using flimsy arguments, and one cannot pile one flimsy argument on another and then claim that one has discovered a universal truth. The shocking, appalling history of racism shows what that type of thinking led to, and still leads to.

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