

# EdgeScience

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Current Research and Insights

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# A Case of Xenoglossy Under Hypnosis

**R**isa” is a housewife who lives in central Japan. She was born in 1958, and her native tongue is Japanese. She majored in home economics when she was a college student and had some experience working as a dietician. Due to various physical problems and difficulties in her household, she sought the help of a hypnoterapist. During a 70-minute hypnotic session conducted in June 2005, she recalled “past-life” memories as a village chief in Nepal. She provided some proper names and some information about her village life. In response to the hypnoterapist’s request to speak in Nepali, she also uttered two non-Japanese sentences, although she has no knowledge of Nepali in the waking state. But the hypnoterapist’s attempt to verify the information Risa gave during the session was not successful.

After reading a report written by the hypnoterapist,<sup>1</sup> we borrowed the audio data of the session and examined the contents, including the two sentences, with the help of three native speakers of Nepali. The Nepali speakers judged that the two sentences were indeed Nepali and that some of the proper names given by the subject sounded familiar to them. Upon request, Risa and the hypnoterapist agreed to conduct another session.

## Background

When a person is able to speak a language he or she could not have acquired by natural means, the phenomenon is known as xenoglossy. It usually occurs in a trance or altered state. Most published reports of xenoglossy contain too little information to permit a test of their validity, and the question of earlier normal learning of the language looms large in such cases. There is a narrow subset of such cases, however, in which the subject seems to be able to *converse intelligently in the foreign language* and is not just repeating a few phrases of a language that they may have learned casually in some way. These cases, known as responsive xenoglossy, are rare but offer true probative value. Once the possibility of fraud or early language learning is eliminated in such cases, only three solutions—all quite extraordinary—remain to potentially explain the phenomenon: (1) the subject is possessed by another personality; (2) the subject’s mind is able to extract knowledge of the language from the minds of others; or (3) the subject has learned the language in a previous lifetime, which would be proof of reincarnation.

As far as we are aware, there are only two other well-

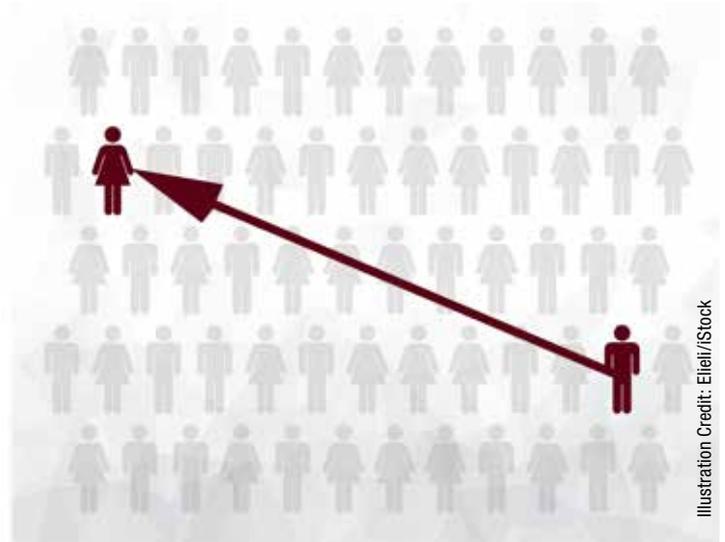


Illustration Credit: Eileli/Stock

documented cases of xenoglossy occurring under hypnosis, both of which were reported by Dr. Ian Stevenson, a psychiatrist at the University of Virginia who spent decades researching what he cautiously called “Cases of the Reincarnation Type.” In the first, the subject was a wife of a physician in Philadelphia who had employed hypnosis in his medical practice from time to time, and also conducted experiments at home. In one of the experimental sessions with his wife, she started to say, “I am a man.” When asked his name, he said “Jensen Jacoby,” and spoke some Swedish words and two Swedish phrases. In eight sessions conducted in 1955–56, Jensen appeared and spoke Swedish. He did so responsively in the last three sessions with native speakers of Swedish.<sup>2</sup>

In the second case, the subject was a wife of a Methodist minister who practiced hypnosis for relieving occasional pains in members of his family or friends. One day he hypnotized his wife, attempting to remove her back pain. To his question: “Does your back hurt?” she replied: “Nein” (No). In the next and subsequent sessions, his wife identified the speaking personality as “Gretchen” who lived in Germany in the second half of the 19th century. In one of the sessions (conducted in 1971), Ian Stevenson himself had a sensible conversation with the subject in German.<sup>3</sup>

The case being described here, Risa’s case, is only the third known case of xenoglossy occurring under hypnosis. Although her case shares some of the weaknesses with the two

cases reported by Stevenson, when taking into account the physical and emotional state of the subject and the linguistic distance between the subject's native tongue and the language spoken under hypnosis, this case can be regarded as presenting a strong piece of evidence for the survival hypothesis, stronger even than either of Stevenson's cases for reasons that will become clear once the case has been described.

### Investigation and Analysis

Our session with Risa took place on May 9, 2009, and was attended by a Nepali speaker, Paudel Kalpana, a graduate student at Asahi University. During the session, Risa was able to communicate in Nepali for about 24 minutes until the hypnotherapist decided to terminate the session as Risa became tired and less responsive. The conversation data was transcribed and analyzed with the help of Paudel Kalpana, who spoke with Risa during the session, and anthropologist Khanal Kishor Chandra, a visiting researcher at Chubu University. Linguist Kiryu Kazuyuki of Mimasaka University undertook detailed grammatical analysis from the point of view of Nepali linguistics.

Concerning her "past-life" as a Nepali village chief, Risa recalled his name (Rataraju), his name as a boy (Kira), his wife's name (Rameli), his son's name (Kujaus), his daughter's name (Adis), his father's name (Tamali) and his tribe (Tamang), as well as the food he ate (lentil, rice, millet), the number of villagers/households at the time (25), and what funerals involved (Himalaya, cremation).

The two Nepali speakers found that Risa did have some command of the language, although it was clearly not at the level of a native speaker. Attempting to quantify that impression, we divided the data into 81 chunks and analyzed the first 70 (chunks 71–80 being excluded because Risa was so fatigued). The Nepali speakers found that Risa clearly established conversation in 27 chunks, appropriately answering the questions 39 percent of the time. For example, in response to the question "Tapaiko nam ke ho?" (What is your name?), Risa replied "Mero nam Rataraju" (My name is Rataraju).

In another 37 percent of the cases, although Risa answered in Nepali, she might not have understood the questions. For example in response to the question "Kati barsa hunu bho?" (How old are you?), she said "Ke?" (What?), or in response to the question "Gharma shrimati hunuhuncha ki hunuhunna?" (Is your wife at home or not at home?), she said "Bujina" (I don't know). These responses were not as strongly evidential as those in the previous category, since one can pretend, at least for a short period of time, that he/she has some command of a language which he/she actually does not know by memorizing and using certain phrases such as "I don't know." In 9 percent of the conversational chunks, Risa's responses were judged "inappropriate," and in another 16 percent, her responses judged "ambiguous," when for example an utterance can be interpreted either as an answer such as "yes" or as just a gap-filler.

We then considered Risa's vocabulary. The number of words she used was not large, only 34. However, of these 34



Anthropologist Khanal Kishor Chandra (at right) with Nallu villagers

words, Risa first uttered 20 words herself. The fact that she uttered these words within a short conversation seems to suggest that she has at least a minimum level of vocabulary knowledge to communicate.

Anthropologist Chandra, who is quite familiar with linguistic situations in Nepal, pointed out one interesting fact about the conversation that took place. When asked for the name of his wife, Risa did not seem to understand the word *shrimati*, which is the word for "wife" the Nepali speaker first used in her question. This word is usually taught in lessons of the language, and educated people are familiar with it. When Kalpana replaced the word with *swasni*, a non-standard word meaning "wife," Risa instantly understood the meaning and answered appropriately. This seems to indicate that the Nepali Risa used was not standard Nepali, even if she had learned the language.

It should be pointed out that Risa's responses tended to be short, either a few words or simple sentences, and no complex structures like subordinate clauses are observed. One notable point, however, is that Risa used two forms of the same verb *hunu*, meaning "be," as in:

- a. Tapai Nepali huncha? "Are you Nepali?"
- b. Mero buwa Tamang hunu-huncha. "My father is the Tamang."

The Nepali verb *hunu* shows a complicated conjugational pattern depending on the properties of the subject. In (b) the high-grade form is properly used showing respect to the father of the previous personality. On the other hand, in (a), the singular low-grade form of the same verb is used. The form here is the third person singular low-grade form rather than the expected second person singular low-grade *hunchas* or second person middle grade *hunchau*. Chandra explains that using the third person singular form in an environment where the second person form is required is quite common,

especially among speakers whose first language is not Nepali (like Rataraju, who seems to have belonged to the Tamang), and that the usage here, although “ungrammatical” from the viewpoint of the standard grammar, makes more sense than the proper form. This usage is particularly surprising in view of the fact that Japanese, Risa’s native language, lacks Subject-Verb Agreement, and that learners of languages with this property, like English, tend to have considerable difficulty in acquiring this part of the grammar.

There are some weaknesses to the present case, however: Risa rarely initiated a conversation and her responses were relatively slow. Her limited vocabulary and sentence structure, and the spotty nature of her responses, are weaknesses shared with the two cases reported by Stevenson.<sup>4</sup> But Risa’s case differs from—and may be stronger than—Stevenson’s cases in two important ways. First, Risa only had two sessions in which she communicated in her past-life language, whereas in the case of Jensen, the Swedish-speaking personality Stevenson examined appeared in eight sessions, and in the case of Gretchen, the German-speaking personality Stevenson examined appeared in 19 sessions. Since in both of these cases the past life language seemed to improve over the sessions, it might be plausible to assume that “past life” personalities need to be called out a number of times for them to fully recover the language they used and in Risa’s case the number of times the previous personality was called out was not enough to exhibit some fluency with the language.

Second, Japanese, Risa’s native language, is genealogically unrelated to Nepali, which is an Indo-European language.

This is in sharp contrast with the cases of Jensen and Gretchen, where the subjects’ native language, English, and the languages of their “past life” personalities, Swedish and German, are classified as Germanic languages and genealogically very close to English. Therefore, in these cases, we might suspect that the subjects were somehow able to utilize their linguistic knowledge, at least at the level of grammar, in speaking the “unknown” language. This possibility, however, can be excluded in the present case.

In addition, we might also point out the strong possibility that the Rataraju personality was not a native speaker of Nepali, since he referred to himself as belonging to the Tamang, whose native tongue, Tamang, is in the Sino-Tibetan family. This could have contributed to the lack of fluency in his speech.

Because of these differences, we might be able to say that the present case is stronger in evidential value than the cases investigated by Stevenson.

### Learned Language?

The most important point that remained to be determined in this case is whether Risa had the opportunity to learn Nepali by normal means. She claims that she has never studied Nepali nor has she had contact with Nepali speakers. In order to confirm her claims, we first investigated the personal history of the subject, which led us to conclude that it is highly unlikely for her to have learned Nepali. We then asked Risa and her husband to sign a pledge that Risa had never learned Nepali in her entire life, which the couple did willingly. Finally, we gave Risa



The village of Nallu, Nepal

a polygraph test, which was conducted by Arasuna Masana of the Houkagaku Kantei Center (Forensic Science Investigation Center). Arasuna was chief of the Osaka Prefectural Police Criminal Investigation Laboratory and has conducted polygraph tests on more than 8,000 people. The test was conducted in August 2009 at Risa's home. In the test, three questions related to the subject's ability to speak Nepali were asked. Two of them involved the subject being able to recognize two Nepali words, "chimeki" (neighbor) and "chora" (son), which she apparently understood in the hypnotic session. Since no notable reactions were observed, it was concluded that the subject did not recognize the two words, which suggests that she has never learned Nepali consciously. The third question was about Nepali currency, which any person who has learned the language would be expected to know. Again, the subject's reaction showed that she lacked the relevant knowledge.

### Verification of Statements

After considerable effort, we were able to verify some of the statements Risa had made in conversations. We found a likely candidate for the village of Nallu, which she had mentioned in the 2005 session, about 25 kilometers south of Kathmandu, in the Lalitpur district. According to the 2001 Nepal census

data, this village had a population of 1,849 living in 320 individual households in 1991. There did not seem to be any other village of the same name, and more importantly, 96.7 percent of the villagers were reported to be Tamangs, the tribe the Rataraju personality claimed to belong to.

With the village of Nallu located, and since Risa under hypnosis seemed to refer to the Rana dynasty, which ruled the Kingdom of Nepal from 1846 to 1951, we hoped that we might be able to track down the past-life personality by doing some fieldwork in the village. Ohkado Masayuki undertook this task, spending a week in the village in August 2010 with Chandra, who served as guide and interpreter. We had relatively long interviews with seven people: a 38-year-old elementary school teacher; the secretary of the Village Development Committee (VDC) at Nallu (June–July 2008); the vice secretary of the VDC at the Nallu village since June 2008; the oldest man in the village (103) and his 78-year-old son; the 53-year-old, former village chief; and the 65-year-old secretary of the VDC (1980–1984, 1992–2010). The villagers interviewed gave two people, Ratnaraj Shapkota and Rana Bahadur, as possible candidates. However, the names of their wives and children are different and neither of them could have been Rataraju.

The village did not keep written records before 1950. Furthermore, all the documents in the VDC at the village



Nallu villagers with investigator Ohkado Masayuki (wearing glasses)



Jaya Bahadur Ghalan, 103, is the oldest man in the village.

were burned in 2003 at the time of the People's War. The only relevant record we found is the electoral roll of 1994 stored in the Election Commission of Nepal. Rataraju himself would not be listed in the document as a voter, as he would have long been dead, but we hoped that we might be able to find the names of his son or daughter. However, we were not able to find any of the names Risa had mentioned among the 1643 voters (plus corresponding "guardians" for women) listed in the document, although a few could be considered "close" (Ratnaraj Shapkota instead of Rataraju). But the people whose names are close to Adis or Rameli did not have husbands or fathers whose names are close to Rataraju.

So neither the interview-based nor the document-based research was able to identify the people Risa had mentioned.

On the other hand, Risa's remarks about food and funerals turned out to be correct, or apparently correct. Lentil and millet are both principal foods in the village, and rice is also eaten on special occasions. The funeral reference to the "Himalaya," which all the Nepalis we consulted in Japan said they did not understand, seems to indicate the funeral custom in the village, in which bodies are brought to a mountain from where the Himalaya can be seen and the body cremated.

Risa's remarks about the number of villagers at the time of her claimed previous life are not off the mark either. According to former village chief Krishna Bhadur Tamang, the village used to be divided into 25 small groups. (But it is not the case that there were only 25 households, let alone 25 people as far as the former chief knows.)

But the most intriguing discovery related to the case concerns how to express numbers. When asked about the age when he died, the Rataraju personality answered "at satori" (eight and seventy), putting the digit of one's place before the digit of ten's place. All the Nepali speakers we consulted in Japan commented that this was "unnatural." In some languages such as German, the one's digits in a number are said before the tens digits, but Nepali is not such a language. But this way of expressing numbers used to be the common in the village, especially before education became widespread. Jaya Bahadur Ghalan, who was 103 years old, unintentionally showed us this custom when we asked him how old he was. Since he can no longer speak, he communicates with gestures. In answering our question, he first showed "three" and then "100" in accordance with the old custom in the village.

**“The statements she made matched the life and customs of the place where the previous-life personality was considered to have lived...”**

### Conclusion

There are many cases in which subjects' "past-life" recalls are to be regarded as products of their imagination.<sup>5-8</sup> However, although it happens rarely, hypnotic regression seems to induce a state in some people that can only be accounted for paranormally, either as (1) possession, (2) superpsi, or (3) reincarnation.

We discount the possibility of possession because the Stevenson's two cases and our case are different from possession cases in at least three ways: (1) Personalities in possession tend to be more talkative. Basically, the subjects in the three cases spoke only when questioned. (2) The subjects seemed to understand their native languages (English in Stevenson's cases and Japanese in our case), so the two personalities seemed to go hand in hand. (3) The personalities were evoked only under hypnosis.

We also discount the possibility of superpsi because, as philosopher Curt J. Ducasse<sup>9</sup> and Stevenson<sup>2,3</sup> have argued, one must recognize the difference Michael Polanyi drew between "knowledge *that...*" and "knowledge *how to...*" The former is information and could hypothetically be transmitted by telepathy or other psi abilities, but the latter is a skill and cannot be so transmitted. In order to converse in a language, one must practice it; it is not simply a matter of repeating a few words and phrases.

Risa's case falls short of a perfect confirmed case of reincarnation, however, as her past-life personality was not identified. But given that she displayed some ability to converse in a language not known to her—one that was perhaps not even that well known to her past life personality—and that the statements she made matched the life and customs of the place where the previous-life personality was considered to have lived, we conclude that this case provides some potential support for the reality of reincarnation.

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**"In our constant search for meaning in this baffling and temporary existence, trapped as we are within our three pounds of neurons, it is sometimes hard to tell what is real. We often invent what isn't there. Or ignore what is. We try to impose order, both in our minds and in our conceptions of external reality. We try to connect. We try to find truth. We dream and we hope. And underneath all of these strivings, we are haunted by the suspicion that what we see and understand of the world is only a tiny piece of the whole."**

Alan Lightman, *The Accidental Universe: The World You Thought You Knew* (Pantheon, 2014)