

Re: History of French

Source: <http://sci.tech-archive.net/Archive/sci.lang/2004-09/2879.html>

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Date: 09/19/04

Date: Sat, 18 Sep 2004 23:39:36 -0700

Miguel Carrasquer wrote:

- > *However, this rather proves that there is a significant*
- > *difference between L1 acquisition during early childhood,*
- > *and L2 acquisition at a later stage.*

During its first months a child's brain is developing neural connexions, and yes, that might well be when, if not exposed to language, it will likely never develop the connexions necessary for coping with language. Later, the child, I guess, has little else to do but listen, and respond, every hour of its waking life. An adult, rather, an older child (at what age does a child has to fend for itself? depends on the social environment), has only a smaller part of its waking life to hone its language skills (again, a guess).

- > *cases like that of Genie show*
- > *that there is a window of opportunity for learning language*
- > *in early childhood*

When the brain continues its development, no?

- > *We also know that immigrants into foreign-language*
- > *countries, who relocated after early childhood, attain*
- > *native (or near-native) ability only rarely. This is not a*
- > *question of time, money or motivation. The learning*
- > *environment is nearly identical if we compare an infant*
- > *("non-speaking") child and an adult immigrant*

I beg to differ here, for the reasons I have given above.

- > *So why is it that I and my siblings speak Dutch natively,*
- > *while my parents --who had a head-start of a couple of*
- > *years-- speak it with a heavy accent, peculiar vocabulary*
- > *and incorrect syntax?*

Until about 15 year ago I believe I spoke Japanese without a trace of an accent—because once, at Changi airport I asked a Japanese if I could take the luggage trolley which he seemed to need no longer. He had his back turned to me and answered "Doozo". Then he turned around and saw me, and suddenly looked completely astonished. From which I gathered that he had marked as Japanese, from my speech. Yeah, I know, anecdotal evidence. Mind you, I had learnt Japanese the hard way, spending all my time for two months with a Japanese engineer for whom I was interpreting

- > *I've had to use*
- > *books, schools and teachers to attain this level.*

I spent two years learning Japanese at the Langues Orientales. The books, Naoe Naganuma's Hyoojun Nihongo Tokuhon series, were hopeless. The lecturer, René Sieffert, was hopeless. I only learnt, a little, from the tutors, Mori (who spoke perfect French) and Fujimori (who spoke good, but funny, French—il était fâché avec le masculin et le féminin). I really got the basics from "Teach Yourself Japanese" and the rest from that Japanese textile engineer and later from visiting businessmen.

- > *There is another kind of exception, which is more tragical.*
- > *Adults who have moved to a different linguistic environment,*
- > *who never acquire perfect command of the new language, but*
- > *forget most or even all of their native speech.*

Henry Fielding has such a character in "Tom Jones". A French émigré who after twenty years in England still couldn't manage English and had forgotten French.

- > *I'm not a neurobiologist, so I have no theory about *why**
- > *there is such a dramatic difference between "L1" and "L2"*
- > *acquisition.*

I'd say it's the first months, when the brain is still building its connexions. Later, I'd say it's a matter of how long you are immersed in a language. I could never speak Chinese properly, although I used to read and write it with native fluency. Got 19 3/4 out of 20 in the final (written) exam, half of which was translating a literary text (by Paul Claudel I think) into Chinese. I was told that the examiner who rated my exam paper had asked if I was Chinese. Actually... I remember now, there was a French engineer in the company I worked for who spoke Japanese so well that the Japanese always mistook him for a Japanese—

until they saw him. His name was Matonnet, which also happens to be a Japanese name (Matone), so, over the phone, they could not tell. Well, he'd spent several years in Japan, true. But I don't think my story is exceptional at all. I had a Danish colleague at Telecom who spoke perfect English, indistinguishable from a native. She'd learnt English as an adult, as I had Japanese (I was 18 when I started at the Langues Orientales, 21 when I worked with Japanese people). Oh, another one. My godfather, who spent part of WWII impersonating a German officer (he'd become the lover of the fellow's wife). Well, it's only anecdotal evidence.