

Re: History of French

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From: Miguel Carrasquer (*mcv_at_wxs.nl*)

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On Sat, 18 Sep 2004 23:39:36 -0700, Jacques Guy
<jguy@alphalink.com.au> wrote:

>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.

I don't think it's the first months.

>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).

If you're suddenly dumped into an environment where you
don't speak the language, I can't imagine not spending every
moment of my waking life honing my language skills
(preferably in combination with eating, drinking and
otherwise surviving).

>> 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.

My parents had been immersed in Dutch for several years before I got around to learning it (in kindergarden). It took me just a few months to overtake them. So it's definitely not a matter of "how long". It isn't even a matter of "how long" if we compare one adult with another. I suppose if I went to live in a country whose language I didn't know, it would take me little time to surpass the average immigrant who had been living there for years, certainly when it comes to pronunciation (grammar and vocabulary is perhaps a different matter). That's simply a

matter of having a "knack" for language, or not having it. But I'm sure a child below the threshold age would beat me anytime. Like a child will beat me anytime at a game of "Memory".

*>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.*

Frederik Kortlandt asked me if I or my parents were Latvian during my first Latvian class in University.

Anyway, I think the first few months have nothing to do with it. It's been stated that the critical age is 5–7 years. Is it a coincidence that ca. 5 years is also (at least in my case) the age that memory begins? I have some scattered memories of when I was four, but the connected narrative doesn't start until age five or so. Is that a coincidence, or is it a consequence of having acquired language "natively", or is it that starting up the "long-term memory machine" takes away the capacity of learning new languages fast and effortlessly, the "L1 way"? I don't know.

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