

Do children learn language more easily?

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I think this is important enough to post here. Mark Rosenfelder in <http://www.zompist.com/whylang.html>

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One may fall back on the position that language may be hard for children to learn, but at least they do it better than adults. This, however, turns out to be surprisingly difficult to prove. Singleton examined hundreds of studies, and found them resoundingly ambiguous. Quite a few studies, in fact, find that adult learners progress faster than children (Language Acquisition, pp. 94–106). Even in phonetics, sometimes the last stronghold of the kids–learn–free position, there are studies finding that adults are better at recognizing and producing foreign sounds.

Now, I think Singleton misses a key point in understanding this discrepancy: the studies he reviews compare children vs. adults who are learning languages. That's quite reasonable, and indeed it's hard to imagine an alternative approach; but the two groups are not really comparable! All children have to learn at least one language; but few adults do. So the studies compare the situation of all children with that of the minority of adults motivated to formally learn other languages.

Why do children learn languages well, when even adults who want to learn them have trouble with them? Innate abilities aside, children have a number of powerful advantages:

They can devote almost their full time to it. Adults consider half an hour's study a day to be onerous.

Their motivation is intense. Adults rarely have to spend much of their time in the company of people they need to talk to but can't; children can get very little of what they want without learning language(s).

Their peers are nastier. Embarrassment is a prime motivating factor for human beings (I owe this insight to Marvin Minsky's *The Society of Mind*, but it was most memorably expressed by David Berlinski (in *Black Mischief*, p. 129), who noted that of all emotions, from rage to depression to first love, only embarrassment can recur, decades later, with its full original intensity). Dealing with a French waiter is

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nothing compared with the vicious reception in store for a child who speaks funny.

If adults could be placed in a similar situation, they might well learn languages as readily (I don't say 'easily'!) as children. The closest such situation I can think of is cross-cultural marriage. And indeed, this works quite well. My wife, for instance, a native Spanish speaker who came here in her late 20s, has learned exceptional English, since we speak it at home. By contrast, some of her Spanish-speaking friends of the same age, married to other Spanish speakers, speak English haltingly and with a strong accent.

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