

Re: Do children learn language more easily?

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- *From:* Aidan Kehoe <kehoea@xxxxxxxxxxxxxxx>
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Ar an triochadú lá de mí na Samhain, scríobh Nathan Sanders:

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.

"Full time" for children isn't more than a few hours a day, scattered throughout the day in small chunks. Babies sleep multiple times a day, for multiple hours at a time. They also spend a large portion of their waking time crying, a state that is hardly conducive to learning anything requiring concentration.

The UN calls people children up until the age of eighteen; even the US Army doesn't enlist people under 17.

Adults consider half an hour's study a day to be onerous.

Even if true (it's not --- my high school and college foreign language classes lasted an hour per day, and homework would be even more than that),

It is, outside of academia. I have an hour and a half of Spanish a week, and I don't get to doing the trivial homework, what with the full-time job and not living anywhere that I'm forced to communicate in it. I've been learning the language for just over a year, and my effective command of it is much, much better than that of a three-year-old child—I can say that a particular waitress looks androgynous, wonder what the Italians ate before the Spanish brought tomatoes from the New World in reaction to my conversation partner expressing a similar bemusement at potatoes in Germany, discuss things like political systems, what will happen in Cuba when Castro dies, not things a

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three-year-old can say anything useful about.

Now, I and the three-year-old Spaniard have differing areas where our respective commands of the language fall down. My pronunciation, while understandable, is a good way from that of any native speaker (unless there are Chicanos who have the Irish post-vocalic R in particular, which seems unlikely). My command of banal household vocabulary is terrible. But the child can't handle adult conversations, or much written vocabulary—from the back of a book I bought but haven't read yet:

Un representante singular de la cultura laica, Umberto Eco, y un príncipe de la Iglesia, Carlo Maria Martini, han volcado en estas páginas sus reflexiones acerca de la ética y sus fundamentos en el fin del milenio. A modo de diálogo epistolar, con absoluta libertad dialéctica y sin excesivos miramientos por sus respectivos papeles, debaten algunos de los volares que se cuestiona el hombre contemporáneo; ...

I've no doubt I've understood most of that, from cross-referencing to English and French—here's a translation without reference to a dictionary, if anyone wants to disabuse me of that impression:

A singular representative of secular culture, Umberto Eco, and an important figure of the Church, Carlo Maria Martini, have set forth their reflections in the area of ethics and its foundations at the end of the millennium. In the form of an exchange of letters, with complete dialectic freedom and without excessive reference to their notes, they debate some of the values that contemporary man has to consider; ...

Ask for a paraphrase of the Spanish paragraph from a three-year-old from Bogotá, and you'll get ¿qué? if you're lucky. I have a much better command of the context of adult situations like bars and hotels, so I will understand immediately the explanations of a woman in a maid's uniform knocking on my door at 10AM, and know that saying *perdone, más tarde, por favor* will get her to go away, while the child may need ten minutes' explanation, if it ends up in that position.

[...] while children, who can barely play with the same toy for more than five minutes, can somehow manage to magically devote their "full time" to learning language.

Again; children are children up to eighteen or seventeen. Child does not mean baby.

Babies, unlike adults, demonstrate no ability at all to focus on any single activity for more than a brief period of time.

If you're working on the assumption that what a child can speak at the age

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of three is a full command of a language, then say so. I think that's a ridiculous position.

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).

[...] Later on, children can get essentially everything they need with simple sentences. Children have absolutely no "need" whatsoever to learn things like relative clauses, island constraints, pied piping, subject–aux inversion, pronouns, etc. And yet they do it anyway, despite their simpler child language being more than sufficient to meet their needs.

They also acquire a long list of idiosyncratic constructions that are not generalised into any sort of wider construction at all; how do you do? , kick the bucket, hang in there, German was für ein & (never was für eine or was für einen despite für taking the accusative).

Anyway, I think you're underestimating their needs. Their needs are those of a human being active in society, and it's rare for an adult to do without relative clauses, island constraints, pied piping, subject–aux inversion, pronouns, etc. in a second language, if that adult's life is mostly lived through that second language.

Compare this to pidgins: adult speakers of pidgins get essentially everything they need (which is certainly far more comprehensive and complex in nature than children's needs) by using a linguistic system that is typically no more complex than the speech of a five-year-old, and in fact, is often simpler in many ways.

Five-year-olds now, is it?

If pidgins work for adult needs,

Pidgins work for adult needs when it comes to trade and fragmentary contact. Not when it comes to leading a complete life; that's where you get creoles from, and creoles tend to be a good deal more complex.

[...] and if language acquisition is driven by need, then we would not expect child language to ever progress in complexity beyond what we see in pidgins. And of course, we find that child language does progress well beyond pidgin-level complexity.

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Their peers are nastier. Embarrassment is a prime motivating factor for human beings

Completely irrelevant to the important early stages of language acquisition.

Na und? He said children.

[...] Further, embarrassment seems to do nothing to alleviate some of the most salient disfluencies a child can have, such as lisps and stuttering, which are mocked far more frequently than other disfluencies like using the wrong preposition.

And this isn't a consequence of their being harder to eliminate? I'm reminded of a Cuban acquaintance that eliminated his substitution of /~/ for <rr> in an afternoon, in his childhood, on his own; my understanding is that just doesn't happen for people who stutter, or speak with a lisp.

[...] And no amount of embarrassment from pedantic authority figures seems to dissuade the average speaker from ending sentences with prepositions, splitting their infinitives, or getting pronoun case all mixed up inside coordinated NPs.

Eh, it also seems not to dissuade people from drinking, premarital sex, drug use. Anyway, I think pedantic authority figures are at their most unsuccessful when they have no real power; when they are running grade-school classrooms, they seem to manage to get people to spell correctly quite well. When the extent of their power is an article a week in the New York Times, then it's a different question.

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Santa Maradona, priez pour moi!

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