

SOCIAL CONSTRAINTS ON ADULT LANGUAGE LEARNING

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INTRODUCTION

No doubt we all can agree that adults and children tend to cope with language in rather different ways, but we do not seem to agree on the causes for the differences. At least since Penfield,¹ and more strongly since Lenneberg,² many students have found it attractive to suggest that neuro-functional maturation governs a "critical period," during which time language is learned most readily or most "naturally." There has been debate on just how critical and just how narrow this period is,³ and Lamendella even has offered the term "sensitive period" as a more suitable way of expressing the concept;⁴ but a number of workers, including Lamendella, have pointed to specific aspects of neurological maturation as possible explanations for the apparent decline in the adult's ability to acquire language.

In a somewhat different vein, Krashen has suggested that the close of the critical period may be related to Inhelder and Piaget's stage of formal operations, which is believed to begin at about the time of puberty.^{3,5} It is claimed that this is the period when the child begins to formulate abstract hypotheses in order to explain phenomena and the time when he wants general solutions to problems rather than merely *ad hoc* solutions. The tendency of adolescents to construct theories may inhibit "natural" language acquisition, with the result that adolescents and adults no longer are able to avoid constructing a conscious theory of the language they are learning.

Whether the emphasis is placed upon neurofunctional maturation or upon Piagetian stages of mental operation, these arguments point to maturational changes that turn the postadolescent into a different kind of learner than the younger child, but others have been more impressed with the social and psychological factors that hamper adult learning. In his book *The Pidginization Process*, John Schumann offers us a case study of an adult Costa Rican worker in the United States who made very little progress in English.⁶ Schumann attributes the worker's low achievement to what he calls the "social and psychological distance" of the learner from speakers of English.⁶ As factors of social distance that can affect the rate of learning, Schumann cites the political, cultural, technical, and economic dominance relationships between the two language groups; the degree of assimilation desired; the cohesiveness of the groups; relative size of the

groups; the congruence of the cultures; the attitudes of the people toward each other; and the expected period of residence of language learners in the area of the target language. As factors of psychological distance, he considers language and culture shock, motivation, and ego permeability.⁶

Maturation factors are, presumably, universal and can be cited as explanations for the difficulties that all adults seem to face. Schumann's factors of social and psychological distance, however, are variable, so the implication would seem to be that an adult learner who is not burdened by these factors would learn a language quite easily. A few other observers have pointed to more general social factors that put barriers in the way of most or all adults. Wagner-Gough and Hatch, for instance, point to the different kinds of language input received by adults and children as governing, in important ways, their differential success.⁷ Neufeld even suggests that the most parsimonious hypothesis is to assume that adults retain the language-acquisition abilities of children and that "the disparity between child and adult performance can be explained primarily by social and psychological factors which are independent of psycholinguistic abilities."⁸

As a way of agreeing with those who have emphasized the importance of social and psychological factors, I want to summarize some observations of another adult foreign-language learner. My subject was a native speaker of English who spent a year in Sweden, and he lacked most of the social and psychological characteristics that limited Schumann's subject, Alberto. Unlike Alberto, my subject had high status; he dealt constantly, and as an equal, with speakers of the target language; his culture and the culture of his friends and fellow workers in Sweden were neatly congruent and entirely receptive to each other; attitudes on all sides were open and accepting. My subject's motivation also was very high, language and culture shock were minimal, and ego permeability seemed fully adequate to the task at hand. In spite of all the vital advantages that my subject had over Alberto, however, he judged his own progress to be distinctly unsatisfactory. He was in his mid-50s and thus safely past any conceivable critical age for language learning, but he—and I—were loath to admit that the problem was simply that neurological maturation had carried him beyond the age when he could hope to learn a language. On the other hand, the kinds of social and psychological factors that Schumann considers hardly seem to provide an adequate explanation for my subject's difficulties. I want, therefore, to summarize the somewhat different set of social factors that put barriers in the way of my subject's acquisition of Swedish.

I was, of course, my own subject, and what I have to say in the remainder of this paper is the result of my own experience with language acquisition during 1979 and 1980. I spent the year as a "guest professor" at the University of Göteborg, and since I had grown interested in language acquisition, I decided to keep track of what was happening to me. I not only peered into my own head and listened to what came out of my mouth, but I watched what my students, colleagues, and friends did for me—and to me—and I was endlessly impressed by the social barriers that were

placed in my way. I was, in fact, continually frustrated by my inability to gain access to the kinds of language and to the kinds of situations that I thought would help me most. I want to outline the frustrations of one high-status, reasonably well-educated, and certainly highly motivated adult learner, hoping that I can offer a small corrective for what has struck me as excessive emphasis on narrow maturational factors as the explanation for adult disabilities.

The difficulties I faced were many and varied, but in a rough way they can be categorized under three headings: difficulties brought about by the characteristics of the language to which I was exposed; difficulties brought about by my own adult attitudes and behavior; and difficulties brought about by the attitudes and actions of the native speakers with whom I dealt. Each of these calls for comment.

THE LANGUAGE

First, I had to cope with a more complex language and with a language that was both dialectally and stylistically more heterogeneous than the language with which a child deals. Even the linguistic environment of a high-school student is considerably less varied than was mine. A community of preadolescents, or even of high-school-aged students, probably speaks in a more repetitive way, on a narrower range of topics, with less extreme style shifting, a narrower dialectal range, and a less extensive active vocabulary than did the adults with whom I dealt in Sweden. I wanted to understand the news on the radio, drama on television, lectures at the university, to engage in serious conversations on a wide range of topics, and to join in the banter around the lunch table. I wanted to read newspapers, novels, instructions in the telephone book, and directions on soup cans as well as scholarly books and articles in my specialty. In every respect in which the range of topics, styles, and dialects is narrowed, the task of the child or the teenaged learner is made easier.

One dimension of variability, the difference between formal and informal Swedish, was particularly troublesome to me. My problem, common to many adult learners, was in finding my way into the informal and colloquial styles of the language. Rapid colloquial Swedish differs in many ways from formal Swedish. I could work on formal styles by reading, by listening to the radio, and even by consulting grammar books, but fast speech was an unending problem. People spoke so rapidly that words were clipped beyond ready recognition. Many things were left out, and yet people seemed hardly aware of their omissions. The most common Swedish pronunciation of *något* ("some, any") is *nåt*, but a high-school girl denied to me, at first, that people really said anything except *något*. Perhaps she thought that, as an educated adult, I should speak "properly" and put in all the sounds. I learned to read, and to understand the formal spoken language of lectures and the radio news, more readily than I learned to understand rapid conversation. A child begins with rapid

colloquial speech and moves only gradually to the more formal levels. I moved into the language backward, and never found an easy way to find the connections between the two varieties of the language.

As one example of the kind of difficulty I repeatedly faced, I can cite the example of *hur står det till*. I was quite baffled the first time I heard this expression. It was said very rapidly, as Swedes usually say it, and I could not make out the individual words or distinguish the sounds that formed them. I had to have the phrase explained carefully and repeated several times before I could understand that its words meant literally "How stands it also?" and more loosely "How is everything?" It was only later, and through a deliberate experiment, that I found an appropriate reply. I tried the phrase on a friend, and I must have said it reasonably well for I evoked a similarly slurred response—a rapid burst of sound that, once again, I had to have repeated several times. When I sorted through to the phrase *bara bra* ("just fine"), I had one formulaic answer to one formulaic question. Now I could participate in one small Swedish conversational ritual, but in order to do so, I had had to stop people and insist that they explain. A learner less stubborn than I would have let it go.

Another Swedish formula, *Det är så att*, almost always appears at the beginning of a sentence, usually at the beginning of an utterance. It means, literally, "it is so that" or more loosely "it is the case that," but it is used more frequently than any corresponding phrase in English. It also tends to be mumbled so softly and rapidly that its individual parts fade into a slur that the foreign learner has trouble sorting through. Moreover, it adds little to the meaning of a sentence, and a speaker who is asked to slow down and speak more deliberately is likely to leave it out altogether. Sometimes Swedes even seem slightly embarrassed to realize that they have used it, and this may make them reluctant to repeat it. The phrase, nevertheless, is not completely redundant, and the learner makes progress when he can understand it, and he exhibits fluency when he can use it. It is, in part, a breath catcher, a wind up, a pause to let the speaker collect his thoughts. In this capacity it hardly is needed in print, so it is not likely to be learned by reading or even by listening to formal spoken styles. When spoken, however, it also is an announcement that what follows is a statement rather than a question or an exclamation or even a complaint. It sets the stage, and the listener will understand more easily if he catches the stage setting.

In addition to coping with a more varied language, an adult also must cope with a different language than that of a child and a language that is, in some respects, less suitable for early practice. The vocabulary to which an adult has ready access, for instance, is remarkably different from that of a child. A first-language learner begins with concrete words, not always nouns by any means, but with words that he can learn in the context of events that surround him and that are in no way dependent upon other aspects of the language. I am indebted to Staffan Hellberg for the following list of verbs that formed about one-third of the vocabulary of his daughter

Tina when she was 16 months old: *titta* "look at," *tappa* "loose," *hoppa* "jump," *kasta* "throw," *ramla* "fall down," *ligga* "lie down," *lägga* "put," "place," *slänga* "throw," "throw away," *sjunga* "sing," *släcka* "put out," *gunga* "swing," *öppna* "open," *hänga* "hang," *leka* "play," *sitta* "sit," *dricka* "drink," *åka* "go," *stänga* "shut," *ringa* "ring," "telephone," *äta* "eat."⁹

At a stage when I had a far more extensive vocabulary than did Tina, I still lacked some of these most fundamental of all words. I was, for instance, not even aware of the word *ramla*, the everyday word for "fall down" that every young Swede masters in the course of gaining stability on his legs. Instead of Tina's concrete verbs, I was using the Swedish equivalents of can, need, use, want, try, speak, talk, remember, begin, and finish as well as verbs for a good many more concrete activities.

Most of my words could not be learned by direct association with events in the world around me, but required a complex linguistic context. I usually learned them, of course, with the help of English translations. I was fighting my way into relatively abstract levels of the vocabulary without having laid the concrete foundation. Even in my first two months in Sweden I needed ways to be polite, to ask questions, to express doubt. I needed to say "Ten minutes to four," "Five crowns 25 öre," and "Do you have a danish pastry?" and I even would have liked to be able to say such things as "I wonder if you would be good enough to get me another glass of water?" On the other hand, I felt no need for "fall down," and I would have been regarded as quite eccentric had I gone about falling down and muttering *ramla*, even though it is through exactly such physical acts that a small child first builds up the tight associations between words and events that will last him throughout a lifetime.

A child's first words must be learned in a context that is not dependent upon the rest of the language. Tina's first verbs needed the context of actions, rather than other words, to give them meaning; and of course, this also is true of words like "hot" and "bye-bye," which are so common among English-speaking children, as well as of names for concrete objects. None of these words need other words for their interpretation. All can be learned in total isolation from the rest of a language. The words that I wanted, however, usually needed the support of other words. I had to extract most of my words from a complex linguistic environment, and, from the beginning, I had to use words as mere pieces of larger wholes.

In a few cases, however, I could learn words in clearly defined contexts without the support of other words. Greetings and courtesy phrases are the most obvious example, and a few of them were among my earliest acquisitions. After a few hundred Swedes said *hej* to me, I could hardly escape learning, deeply and unforgettably, that *hej* is used sometimes where Americans say "hi" and sometimes where we say "bye-bye." In this case, I could learn a word in the same manner as a child learns it. Even an adult is given the privilege of hearing this word repeatedly, in linguistic isolation but in a social context where its meaning is unmistakable.

I was surprised to discover one other extensive set of words that I could learn in isolation from much other linguistic context. Adults, or at least Swedish adults, use and accept isolated adjectives more readily than they accept isolated nouns or verbs. Upon hearing of a pleasant situation, people sometimes said *trevligt*, and after hearing it a few times alone, stressed, and clearly articulated, I grasped the idea that the word conveys a sense of "pleasant" or "nice," although, since I learned the word without the prop of an English translation, I now find the precise English equivalent less obvious than for many other words. People said *konstigt* in situations where something was just a bit peculiar, and I soon grasped the idea that it means something like "strange" or "odd" or "funny." Someone would look out the window, shake his head, and say *dåligt väder*. From the speaker's dour expression and from the clouds and drizzle outside, I soon associated *dåligt* with unpleasant events. Only later did I learn that it is simply the ordinary word for "bad."

The ease and clarity with which the meanings of these adjectives percolated into my awareness made me realize how much help is provided by the nonverbal context and, in particular, how much it can help the learner to escape his own language. At the same time, I realized how restricted were my own opportunities to learn in this direct way. For most of language, isolated words simply are not enough for an adult. He wants whole phrases and sentences. He wants his essential words to have grammatical decoration; he wants his verbs to have subjects and objects. Naming things and events in isolation is a reasonable activity for a small child, but only rarely is it a reasonable activity for an adult.

Fluent adult use of a language also presumes an enormous range of background knowledge. If it is not quite insulting to spell out this knowledge in detail for an adult, it certainly is tedious. Children, of course, must have these things spelled out. Through all of childhood, we gradually assimilate the basic knowledge and the background assumptions that we need if we are to use a language fluently. To speak a language like a native requires a knowledge of all the assumptions that a fluent native speaker can be expected to make. With the first language, this process takes well over a decade for every human being. Long before a decade has elapsed, an adult is likely to give up and conclude that he has lost the capacity to learn a language.

THE LEARNER

In addition to the difficulties posed by the nature of the language he faces, an adult learner also is burdened by certain inevitable characteristics of being an adult. The relative complexity of the language he faces indeed is a reflection of the complexity of his adult interests, and an adult who is limited to childish speech must be frustrated constantly by the immature level of his conversation. Even if he is willing to subject himself to simplistic and childish conversation, other adults, from whom the foreigner might hope to learn, often are unwilling to do so.

One way in which an adult must, from the very beginning, act differently from a child is in the use of courtesy phrases. Small children are given clear and careful instructions on how to be courteous (Say "excuse me" to the nice man, darling.) and even a high-school child might be advised about linguistic etiquette. An adult, however, somehow is expected to know already. If he is not polite enough to say "excuse me," it certainly would be impolite to tell him to do so. An adult with even the most minimal desire to learn Swedish will want, from his very first day in the country, not only to say *ursäkta mig* ("excuse me"), but to express politeness in many other, more subtle ways as well. He needs these to show the world that he is a civilized and mature adult. But no Swede ever said gently to me, *Sag "ursäkta mig" till farbron*. Without such guidance, *ursäkta mig* was not at all easy to master. Its sounds seemed totally arbitrary, and when I heard it at all, it was mumbled so quickly that I could hardly make it out. Still, in its range of use, *ursäkta mig* is enough like "excuse me" to be relatively easy, but this is not the case with another ubiquitous courtesy phrase, *var så god*. This is used when offering someone something—money, an object, the chance to come in or sit down—a range of circumstances that is quite peculiar to English habits. I needed this phrase, along with *ursäkta mig* and *tack* ("thank you"), during my first days in Sweden—far earlier than a child would need them—but I was given much less help with them than Swedish children must get. It simply would not have been polite to tell me how to be polite.

Being interested in a wider range of activities than a child is, an adult always is tempted to use his language in a more elaborate way than his limited resources allow. In particular, he is likely to attempt syntactic acrobatics while his morphology remains rudimentary. I felt pressed from early in my stay to construct the complex sentences that fitted my complex needs and interests. I managed to learn a good deal of general vocabulary, and I got hold of enough signs of subordination, relativization, and conjunction to allow me to combine my words into rather elaborate sentences at a time when my word- and phrase-level morphology still was a disaster. Signs of gender distinction, the morphology of irregular verbs, the suffixed definite article, even the marking of the plural, were a shambles. I knew, as abstract rules, how to form some plurals, how to attach some definite article suffixes, and how to make the past tense of some verbs, but in the heat of conversation I was quite unable to use these rules. I could produce relatively complex syntax on a poorly developed morphological foundation. I was, in a sense, inventing my own pidgin Swedish, and I was approaching the language along a path quite different from that taken by a small child who masters morphology relatively early, or from that followed in older traditional foreign-language courses, where morphological details were given so much early weight. (For the analogy of pidginization and foreign-language learning, see References 10 and 11.)

My language was too flimsy to support my heroic efforts, but my choice was between speaking with garbled morphology and not speaking at all, and

I was not content to remain silent. An adult wants to talk about complex things, and unless he is content to limit his language to carefully prepared drills, he cannot avoid copious mistakes. To the extent that he acts like an adult by reaching for adult topics and adult complexity, his language is bound to be distorted.

Simply by already knowing one language, moreover, we raise the standards by which we judge our progress in a new language. A child may recognize many words without being at all clear about their exact meaning. The adult's standard of comprehension, however, is likely to be his ability to translate what he hears into his own language—a very high standard, indeed. If a child has no other language, he lacks that external standard of judgment. He may recognize many words and know that they sound right in the context, but fail to know their full meaning. A child may not realize how much he does not know. An adult recognizes his own limitations more clearly and is in danger of being correspondingly discouraged.

An adult who works on a second language and who is unwilling to restrict himself to childish matters always has goals that are beyond his ability, and the variables that determine the success of a particular linguistic encounter are legion: the willingness of the other person to go slowly, to simplify his language, and to avoid exotic vocabulary; the familiarity of his dialect, his voice quality, and the habitual volume at which he speaks; the ambient noise and the acoustic characteristics of the setting; and, of course, the familiarity of the learner with the topic, his interest in the subject, the strength of his determination to try, and, profoundly important, his state of fatigue. Occasionally a learner can take pleasure in a triumph, but each new triumph tends to set a new level of expectation: "But I did so well when I talked to that lady yesterday! Why am I having so much trouble talking to this man now?" Inevitably the precious moments of triumph are few; the moments of frustration are many.

THE NATIVES

The special characteristics of the adult learner are, of course, mirrored by the way in which the adult is treated by those who already speak the language. (The special registers used with children and with foreigners recently have received increasing attention.)^{12,13} With children, we guide, we coax, we repeat, we simplify our language in ways that we are reluctant to do with adults. Even a high-school teacher, even fellow high-school students, probably are more willing to instruct, to suggest, to lead, to take by the hand, and, when necessary, to push and to demonstrate physically so that the learner will understand.

We are also much less upset by breakdowns in understanding with children. We want to understand children and to make ourselves understood, and when we do not understand, we may ask for a repetition, or we may test a guess by asking a question. Too much effort of this sort with an

adult becomes embarrassing. Before asking a fourth time, we smile and pretend that all is clear. Except when we guide children about the avoidance of stigmatized forms, however, instruction in grammar is rare. What we want is the message, and the way he says it is not so important. With an adult, it always is a temptation to give explicit and fussy grammatical advice. At a time when I still was groping desperately for a few simple Swedish words, people insisted upon correcting my genders. I simply could not afford to be distracted with such details so soon.

Many adults also must contend with the experience of earlier failure. If other foreign visitors have failed to learn the language, the natives will not expect much more success from the next visitor. Living among people who are skeptical about one's ability to learn can quickly dampen initiative. When adults are burdened with so many other difficulties, the suspicion soon grows that the task is impossible.

There remains, of course, one final barrier that faces an American professor who tries to learn Swedish: the high standard of English of the Swedes whom he meets. When everyone speaks such excellent English, playing with pidgin Swedish becomes an embarrassing game. How much does one dare burden one's colleagues? One can try an occasional word or phrase. Here and there a knowledge of some language fragments slowly becomes modestly useful, but for many long months, when the crunch finally comes and one really wants to talk or to understand, when one really wants to pass some important information, the temptation to resort to English is irresistible. There is an iron law of ordinary bilingualism: when two bilinguals of unequal ability meet, they avoid the worst speaker's worst language. To speak poor Swedish to someone who speaks excellent English is an insult, an embarrassment, a waste of time, and a strain upon good will. One needs an extraordinarily high level of Swedish before it becomes a serious candidate in a conversation with Swedish academics.

My colleagues read English easily, and they did most of their writing in English. They expected foreign visitors—from France, Russia, and Japan as well as from England and America—to hold conversations and give lectures in English. There were occasions when even Swedes with distinctly limited ability in English could hardly be persuaded that I could manage in Swedish. They acted as if broken English were an acceptable and reasonable medium of communication, but they hardly knew how to cope with someone who spoke broken Swedish. An English-speaking visitor can hardly resist the expectations of the natives, but these expectations do limit any opportunity to be immersed in Swedish. Escape from English is impossible. I passed many days, sometimes several days in succession, with only marginally more Swedish in my environment than I would have had at home in the United States. The occasions when I really needed Swedish were almost nonexistent.

The ease of resorting to one's native language does more than simply stretch out acquisition time. It erodes motivation. If one can get along so easily with English, why bother with Swedish? But reliance upon

English probably has still another effect. It has been suggested that the more hours spent per day in the study of a language, the more will be learned in each hour.^{14,15} That is to say, eight hours spent in a single day will achieve more than eight hours spread out across eight days. When working on Swedish, I had the feeling that it was helpful to cram just as much as possible into my short-term memory. I felt as if this increased the pressure there, and that this higher pressure then would force a part of the Swedish deeper into my long-term memory. The only way to keep the pressure high and to keep a steady flow moving into long-term memory was to spend several hours a day working on Swedish. As soon as other work intervened and as soon as the hours spent on Swedish dropped, I began to feel that my rate of forgetting climbed to compete with my rate of learning. What little got placed in short-term memory escaped before it could be consolidated into a longer-term memory. I then would have to learn the same things all over again.

My subjective feelings about short- and long-term memory may be quite fanciful, but during periods when I spent relatively little time with Swedish, I did feel that my rate of acquisition dropped even more rapidly than the number of hours devoted to study. A child who is immersed in a situation where he is exposed to the language for many hours every day would have a better chance than I of consolidating things into long-term memory before they escaped in forgetfulness.

CONCLUSIONS

In the face of the many difficulties with which an adult must cope, one strategy remains open to anyone who is sufficiently stubborn to keep trying—a concentration upon comprehension. A learner can read, listen to the radio, and watch TV. He can attend lectures. He can try to understand whatever Swedish swirls around him. Even here, of course, he meets barriers. Standards of courtesy may make it seem rude to speak a language in the presence of an adult who does not understand it. When in my presence, Swedes often shifted to English, even when speaking to each other. Even when people did speak Swedish, they sometimes courteously dropped their voices, as if to apologize for lapsing into a language that I could not be expected to understand. In this way, they acknowledged that I could not be included in that part of the conversation and they demonstrated that I did not need to feel responsible for understanding it. By speaking quietly, people were both apologizing to me and absolving me of responsibility, but at the same time they were depriving me of an opportunity to practice.

When Swedes did speak to me, they showed little skill in simplifying their speech to a level that I could more easily understand. Perhaps it would have seemed insulting to speak to me in the same simple terms that they would use with a child. I tried to ask them to speak more slowly, but they found it difficult to maintain a slow pace, and they soon would speed up

again. Often it was easier to switch to English than to produce an artificially simple Swedish. As a result, my opportunities even to listen to Swedish were severely restricted.

First-language learners are immersed in language from the time they are born. For thousands of hours, through month after month and year after year, they are bathed by it. Even a high-school student who attends school for several hours every day, and who associates with contemporaries after school, has far longer hours of intensive foreign-language exposure than I could have, or than most adults ever can have. If the language of children, even the language of teenagers, is a bit simpler and a bit less varied than the language I needed, then young people have both less ambitious goals and a greater opportunity to work toward their goals than I did. To the extent that their teachers and contemporaries are less able, or less willing, to resort to English than were my Swedish colleagues, children get far more chance to hear and to use the new language. We should not be so surprised if children seem to learn languages more quickly than adults. They often have far more opportunity, and the standards by which we judge them are much lower.

The factors that slowed my acquisition of Swedish are in no way mysterious. They strike me, in fact, as quite obvious. They are the kinds of problems that any adult who has tried to learn a foreign language must have experienced. But they are not the factors that seem to be considered under the label of the "critical period" for language acquisition, nor do they reflect the problems of having reached a Piagetian stage of formal operations. They do not even seem to reflect the kinds of generalized social and psychological factors that Schumann cites to explain his subject's poor performance. My problems were simpler and more obvious than any of these, but I think that we ought to take them into account more adequately before we resort to neurological or Piagetian factors, or to social and psychological circumstances that affect only a limited number of learners. I faced so many obvious barriers that I feel no urge to blame some cellular or neurofunctional disability with which I have been burdened since puberty.

At a more generalized level, however, one can hardly rule out maturational changes. Perhaps children are, by nature, more talkative human beings than adults. Perhaps they are more inclined to play. A small human being with a strong impulse both to talk and to play who is surrounded by similar small human beings may venture more vigorously and less fearfully into a new language than would his less talkative and less playful parent. Perhaps we are by "nature"—by genetic endowment—prone to regard the baby talk of our children as cute but to regard the equally broken speech of the foreigner as annoying. Perhaps we more "naturally" reach out to help the child than to help the foreigner. Conceivably, we are also, by nature, the kind of animals that become burdened, as adults, with a consciousness of status and dignity that is incompatible with the childish activity of learning a language. In these very general senses, one hardly

can reject the suggestion that children find it more "natural" to learn a language than adults do. But these are far more generalized abilities than those sought under the rubric of a "critical period" for language learning. Instead of searching for neurological changes at puberty, I would emphasize the more generalized social changes that give an adult a different status among his fellows.

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