What accounts for adoptees’ advantages in birth-language relearning?

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International adoptees who moved to another country where a different language is used, nevertheless rapidly acquire the new language [1,2] and, without further input, forget their birth language [3,4]. After decades since adoption, these individuals report no conscious birth-language memory [5]. Nonetheless, there is converging evidence that the birth-language knowledge acquired early on has been retained and can help the adoptees to relearn the birth-language contrasts faster than control learners without prior experience in that language [6-8]. In [8], Korean adoptees in the Netherlands were trained to identify Korean (fortis-lenis-aspirated) stops [9], were compared with Dutch controls who received the same training, and showed a more rapid learning than the controls.

However, it is still plausible to assume that the relearning benefits may not involve lasting birth-language knowledge but may arise from adoptees’ better ability to learn language sounds in general. Adoptees’ unusual linguistic experience – to have switched from one to another (quite different) sound system in early months – may strengthen their ability to learn phonemic contrasts in general, not just birth-language contrasts in particular. If this is the case, then the adoptees’ rapid learning of birth-language contrasts should generalize to novel, previously unheard language sounds. Here, with the same participants as in [8], we examine whether the Korean adoptees may outperform the controls also on learning Japanese sounds that they have never been exposed to in their life.

Twenty-nine adoptees and 29 controls were trained to identify a Japanese length distinction with feedback. The distinction consisted of an initial short vowel plus a long consonant (henceforth: Geminate), an initial short vowel plus a short consonant (Singleton), and an initial long vowel plus a short consonant (LongVowel), as in [af:a]-[afa]-[a:fa]. This distinction is unlike any Dutch or Korean distinctions, and has been shown to be difficult for Dutch listeners [10]. The same identification without feedback was tested before, during, and after the training. Note that the participants were led to believe they would be trained on Korean, to control any effects that could be caused by knowing it was not Korean.

An ANOVA on accuracy, comparing Group (adoptees/controls), Test (pre/midway/final), and Target (Geminate/Singleton/LongVowel), revealed no main effect of Group and no Group-Test or Group-Test-Target interaction; planned comparisons confirmed no group difference on any test. The results thus showed that the adoptees and controls performed similarly on all tests; nowhere did adoptees show any advantage. This evidence argues against any suggestion that the adoptees might possess an enriched ability to learn language sounds in general, as a result of their early exposure to multiple languages. It also argues against any suggestion that the adoptee advantage on Korean contrasts in [8] might just have been due to a favorable attitude on their part to participation in training on their birth-language; after all, here too they thought that the (Japanese) contrasts were Korean. Thus, the best explanation for adoptee advantages for birth-language relearning [6-8] remains one: birth-language knowledge acquired before adoption is unconsciously retained, and can be drawn upon to facilitate such relearning.
References


