

## 'Rapid reacquisition of native phoneme contrasts after disuse: you do not always lose what you do not use' by Leher Singh et al, *Developmental Science*

In this paper Singh (Psychology) et al demonstrate that exposure to a language at an early age has implications for its reacquisition later in life.

Acquiring one's birth language seems to be a natural process in infants as they are constantly being exposed to the language that they will eventually use. However, one circumstance under which this does not occur is in the case of internationally adopted children. In this population, the infants may be exposed to their birth language but the acquisition process is interrupted if they are no longer exposed to their birth language after adoption. In the current paper, the authors were interested to examine the "retention



without further use" phenomenon, that is, whether early acquired information can be recovered later after an extended period of disuse. Specifically, the authors investigated whether internationally adopted children will be able to re-acquire the ability to discriminate their native language phoneme contrast after prolonged abstinence of the language. This has consequences for adopted children but also for learners who may have had very early exposure to a language via a caregiver which was then suspended.

It was found that without any prior training, children who were adopted from India into America could not discriminate an important sound contrast used to distinguish words in their birth language but not in English. The same pattern was also found among age-matched Americans non-adopted controls. However, after a short amount of training on the contrast, the adopted group improved significantly and discriminated the contrast more accurately than their non-adopted peers. This implies that while English explicitly replaced the birth language of the adopted group, traces of early exposure put them at an advantage on subsequent learning of sounds of their birth language.

Singh L., Liederman J., Mierzejewski R. and Barnes J. (2011) 'Rapid reacquisition of native phoneme contrasts after disuse: you do not always lose what you do not use' *Developmental Science* 14:5, 949–959.