NWO Open Competition project: **The impact of age and exposure on forgetting and retention of the birth language in international adoptees: a perspective from Holocaust survivors**

Summary

This project addresses the long-term effects of being exposed to a language early in life for a limited period of time, as is the case in international adoptees. Recent findings are divided as to whether such a situation will lead to *sequential monolingualism*, or whether such speakers do remain bilingual to some extent, although they cannot readily access their vestigial L1 knowledge. These questions have important implications for questions about the Critical Period, but are difficult to resolve as international adoption typically takes place before puberty.

Early learning and the age of first exposure play a crucial role in language acquisition. Child language learners usually have no problem in attaining native proficiency, while this is quite rare among speakers who were first exposed to a second language (L2) after puberty. There are two views on the role of age for language learning. The first assumes that, due to maturational processes, a neurobiological change takes place around puberty, affecting further language learning - this is the so-called 'Critical Period Hypothesis' (CPH). Other researchers hold that the lower ultimate attainment achieved by older second language learners is due to the fact that knowledge of the first language (L1) is already present and established in the mind, and the L2 has to be acquired through this filter - the 'Impediment Hypothesis' (IH).

Recent evidence suggests that it is not only the age at which exposure begins which is crucial for ultimate attainment, but also the age at which it ceases. There appears to be a dramatic age effect for the deterioration of language knowledge among migrants (a process also known as language attrition): migrants under the age of twelve often experience a drastic reconstruction and reduction of their linguistic system, while for older speakers knowledge appears astonishingly stable. Again, the issue at stake is whether this effect is due to physical maturational changes on the one hand or to progressive entrenchment of language knowledge in conjunction with social and sociolinguistic changes (the fact that adolescents interact with their environment differently from children) on the other.

In both the context of L2 learning and L1 attrition, the role of continued exposure to the first-learned language is crucial. According to the IH, speakers who experience a total break in linguistic tradition (international adoptees) can bypass the L1 'filter', acquiring the L2 like natives and entirely erasing L1 knowledge, even if they were as old as 10 years at the time of adoption (Pallier et al. 2003). The CPH argues that even in the context of such a radical change, L1 attrition and L2 attainment are chiefly modulated by age: some remnants of the L1 are preserved and L2 attainment is not truly native-like among older adoptees (Hyltenstam et al. 2009). The difficulty in putting these two hypotheses to the test is that adoption almost invariably takes place before puberty, so that comparisons between pre- and postpuberty adoptees vs. migrants for whom there was some continued exposure appears impossible.

This project assumes that the contrast between a total break in language tradition vs. continued minimal exposure can be investigated beyond the adoptee age range by taking into account Oral History testimonies of German Jews who escaped from Nazi Germany. Between 1938 and 1939, 10,000 children between the ages of 2 and 17 were brought to England by charity organisations and placed with English-speaking foster families (Kindertransporte). In

the same period of time, an unreported number of children of the same age range escaped to English- speaking countries in the company of family members.

Over the past decades, many organizations have collected testimonies from Holocaust survivors, both in their native language (German) and in the language they adopted after migration (in many cases, that language is English). A comparison of such data from both pre- and postpuberty Kindertransport and family migrants will allow important insights into the role of age vs. exposure for L1 attrition and L2 learning.This project will investigate L1 and L2 proficiency among German Jewish Holocaust survivors. Between 1938 and 1939, 10,000 children between the ages of 2 and 17 were brought to England by charity organisations and placed with English-speaking foster families (Kindertransporte). In the same period of time, an unreported number of children of the same age range escaped to English-speaking countries in the company of family members.

In order to gain insight into the role of age for L2 acquisition and L1 attrition, two populations of pre- and postpuberty migrants will be compared for their proficiency in both L1 and L2: Kindertransport migrants, who upon migration experienced a complete break in linguistic tradition, and family migrants who, while quickly becoming dominant in the L2, still had some exposure to their L1.

The following questions will be addressed:

- is there a difference in ultimate attainment in Englishbetween Kindertransport and family context refugees? (Project 1)

- is there a difference in the retention of German between Kindertransport and family context refugees? (Project 2)

- what is the role of age at migration (pre- vs. post-puberty) in the context of the above questions? (Project 1 and 2)

According to the CPH, there should be a marked, i.e. qualitative, difference with respect to proficiency and native-likeness in both L1 and L2 between the younger and the older group of migrants, with context playing a relatively limited role. According to the IH, the main distinguishing factor should be context, while age should play a limited, quantitative and gradient role.