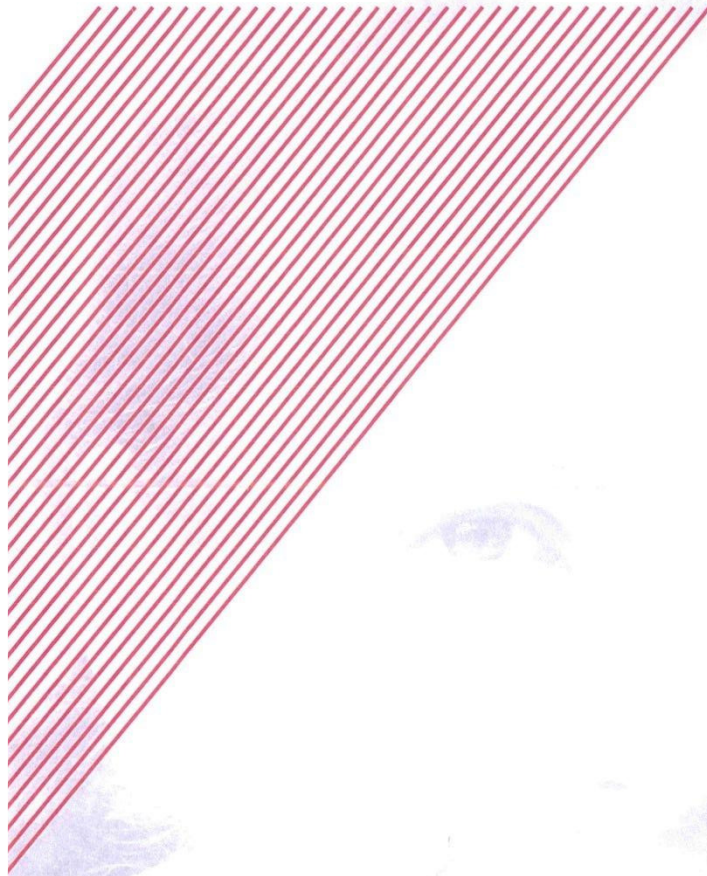




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Treacherous Shibboleths: Language as an indicator of origin

oratie

***Treacherous Shibboleths:
Language as an indicator of origin***

Inaugurele rede in verkorte vorm uitgesproken op

7 juni 2011

bij de aanvaarding van het ambt van
hoogleraar in het vakgebied van de
Engelse taalkunde

door

Monika S. Schmid
Rijksuniversiteit Groningen

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oratiereeks Faculteit der Letteren  
ISBN 978-90-367-5036-3



*Mijnheer de rector magnificus, mevrouw de decaan,  
Zeer geachte aanwezigen,*

The word *shibboleth* has been borrowed into English from the Hebrew language. I freely admit that my knowledge of Hebrew, both ancient and modern, is somewhat patchy (in other words, nonexistent) and so I had originally intended to start this lecture with the definition I found on Wikipedia. However, I then received the rector's guidelines for inaugural lectures, and these said that I should confine myself to scientific matters. As anyone who teaches students these days knows, one of our most difficult tasks is to get them to understand the fact that Wikipedia is *not* a source for scientific reference. I therefore consulted the one source that is considered entirely beyond reproach by linguists worldwide: the native speaker. In other words, I took the 'phone a friend' option – or rather, the 'email a friend' one that is less widely known to television audiences worldwide – namely my colleague Sara Ferman of Tel Aviv University, and asked her “What does *shibboleth* mean?” Her response is in Figure 1.



Fig. 1: *Shibboleth*

So, the Hebrew word *shibboleth* designates “the part of a plant that bears grains”, like an ear of corn in English or an *Ähre* in German (which, by the way, was also what Wikipedia said). The word is still in use in present-day Hebrew, and that is actually quite astonishing, since it is already mentioned with respect to events that took place more than 3,000 years ago. To put this timeframe into perspective: the English language itself is only about half as old as that.

This very early reference to the word *shibboleth* derives from a source that many (rightly or wrongly) would consider somewhat more reliable than Wikipedia, namely the Old Testament. In the Book of Judges (chapter 12), we read about the tribe of the Gileadites who had vanquished the Ephraimites and cut off their retreat back home, across the passages of the Jordan. On the one hand, of course, the Gileadites wanted to prevent as many Ephraimites as possible from arriving back home where they might be able to muster forces again; on the other, the Jordan was constantly being crossed by a great variety of people, not all of whom were Ephraimites. Unfortunately, biometric passports were not yet widely available in the Middle East around 1,000 BC. The Gileadites therefore devised a cunning plan: they asked everyone who wanted to cross to pronounce the word *shibboleth*. In the dialect of the Ephraimites, this was pronounced *sibboleth*, and anyone who thus revealed himself to belong to the enemy was slain. The Book of Judges relates that 42,000 people were thus killed, which might seem a tad excessive by today’s standards but was certainly considered a great victory at the time.

From this story we derive the modern usage of *shibboleth* as a word or term that gives away a speaker’s true origin. There is also a metaphorical usage where the *shibboleth* is “a custom, principle, or belief distinguishing a particular class or group of people”. This last reference comes from the most reliable source of them all, the Oxford English Dictionary.

### ‘Scheveningen’

The story of the *shibboleth* will probably ring some bells, as there are many words or phrases in use that are supposed to distinguish ‘true’ speakers of a language or a dia-

lect – that is, those who learned it from birth - from those who came to it at a later age. In the Netherlands, a rather famous instance of such a shibboleth is the word *Scheveningen*, which allegedly was used by the Dutch resistance in World War II to identify German spies. It should be noted that the account of this particular shibboleth, although extremely widely known, appears to rely entirely on anecdotal reference and is therefore difficult to substantiate (McNamara 2005: 355f.).

The assumption which underlies all of these shibboleths is, of course, that anyone who was born and grew up in a particular linguistic community will not only be a *native speaker*, but will remain a native speaker for his or her entire life. That assumption, however, is not without its problems, and I'd like to illustrate it with a fictional account of a shibboleth in use. My source for this account is a TV series that is immensely popular in English departments worldwide, namely the *Blackadder* series featuring Rowan Atkinson (otherwise probably most famous in his role as *Mister Bean*). The series is set at different periods in English history, and one set of episodes takes place during World War I.

In one of these episodes, entitled *General Hospital*, Captain Blackadder (played by Rowan Atkinson) is charged with the task of finding a German spy known to be hiding out in the field hospital. So that is where Blackadder takes himself, and he encounters three people there: firstly, his wounded comrade-in-arms, Lieutenant George (Hugh Laurie), the nurse Mary Fletcher-Brown (Miranda Richardson) and a very suspicious character, a wounded and bandaged soldier who speaks with an enormously exaggerated German accent (Bill Wallis).

In this cast, the obvious suspect is, of course, the person who sounds 'foreign'. And while Captain Blackadder himself is far more busy seducing the pretty nurse, his cordially loathed colleague and competitor Captain Darling (Tim McInnerny) does his homework, thinks he has found the spy, and triumphantly arrests him and takes him to see General Melchett (Stephen Fry), announcing proudly: "This is the guilty man!" Melchett, however, quickly disabuses him of this notion and reveals that the suspect is, in fact, "Brigadier Sir Bernhard Proudfoot-Smith, the finest spy in the British Ar-

my”. This announcement causes Darling great dismay, since he cannot imagine that the man could possibly be a British spy – after all, “he doesn’t even sound British!” In his heavily accented English, the ‘spy’ then reveals the source of his mistaken identity: “Unfortshunately”, he says, “I haff been undercover in Tshermany for so long that I haff picket up a teensy veensy bit off an accent.”

### *Language attrition*

The phenomenon that Brigadier Sir Bernard Proudfoot-Smith, the finest spy in the British army, is describing here is language attrition, and it is the topic that I have spent the past 15 years (since 1996) exploring. Language attrition is what happens to people who grew up as native speakers of a certain language but then move away from the environment where that language is spoken. For such speakers, the new language often becomes more important in daily life than the mother tongue. It can also become the language in which they consider themselves dominant, that is, the language they speak most frequently and easily. And in such a situation it is indeed possible that speakers begin to use their native language in ways which are different from what a monolingual native speaker might do. For example, a Dutch speaker might come to say *de huis* instead of *het huis* just as a German might say *der Haus* and not *das Haus* sometimes. It is indeed also possible that such speakers may develop a foreign accent, and that the *shibboleth*-test will thus return a false positive. In other words, a *bona fide* Gileadite who for some reason spent a period of time among the Ephraimites might have come to pronounce *shibboleth* as *sibboleth*, and might therefore have been killed unnecessarily.

An extract from a *Blackadder* episode does not entirely conform to the standards of experimental research and scientific rigour and therefore cannot be interpreted as sufficient evidence to substantiate this claim. There is, however, empirical evidence which comes from a recent investigation of this particular phenomenon – the development of a foreign accent among native speakers of German – which I conducted together with my colleague Holger Hopp of the University of Mannheim (Hopp & Schmid, in press). For this investigation, we used data that were collected in two previous studies. Firstly, in his earlier work for his PhD awarded by the University of

Groningen, Hopp investigated speakers who had learned German as a second language relatively late in life, and who had become extremely proficient (Hopp, 2007). From this investigation, we took 20 second language (L2) learners of German whose native or first language (L1) was English and 20 whose L1 was Dutch. All of them had begun learning German after age 10 and had lived in Germany for more than 3 years. We compared these speakers with 40 native speakers of German from my own earlier work (de Leeuw, Schmid & Mennen, 2010), 20 of whom had migrated to Canada and 20 to the Netherlands when they were at least 17 years old, and all of whom had lived there for longer than 10 years. And in order to have a baseline, we also included 20 native speakers of German living in Germany selected from both of the earlier studies.

All of these speakers had performed a task where they had to either describe a very complex picture they saw or re-tell a film sequence from a Charlie Chaplin movie. From these recordings of free speech, we took short excerpts of 12-20 seconds and played them to 130 native speakers of German, all of whom were students of English at the University of Mannheim. We asked these raters to determine whether the person that they had just heard was a native speaker of German or not. Note that, although 12-20 seconds may not seem very long, there are quite a number of studies that show that people actually make the determination much faster than that.

The ratings we collected were done in two steps: the first question we asked was a yes/no question, and the second was a confidence rating. This means that we ended up with a 6-point scale, where a 1 means that the rater is certain that the speaker is a native German and a 6 means that the rater is certain that the speaker is not a native German. As I said, we had 130 such ratings for each of our 100 individual speakers, and we could then calculate the average rating for each person.

The results from this experiment are displayed in Fig. 2. As you can see here, the raters are not unanimous even where the Germans who are still in Germany are concerned: in some cases, people appear to have been somewhat uncertain as to their native speaker status. On the whole, however, these speakers tend to pattern in the



‘yes, this is a native speaker’ category. For the migrants, you can see that quite a large number of people are no longer perceived as natives, and a number of the second language learners pass the shibboleth test with flying colours.

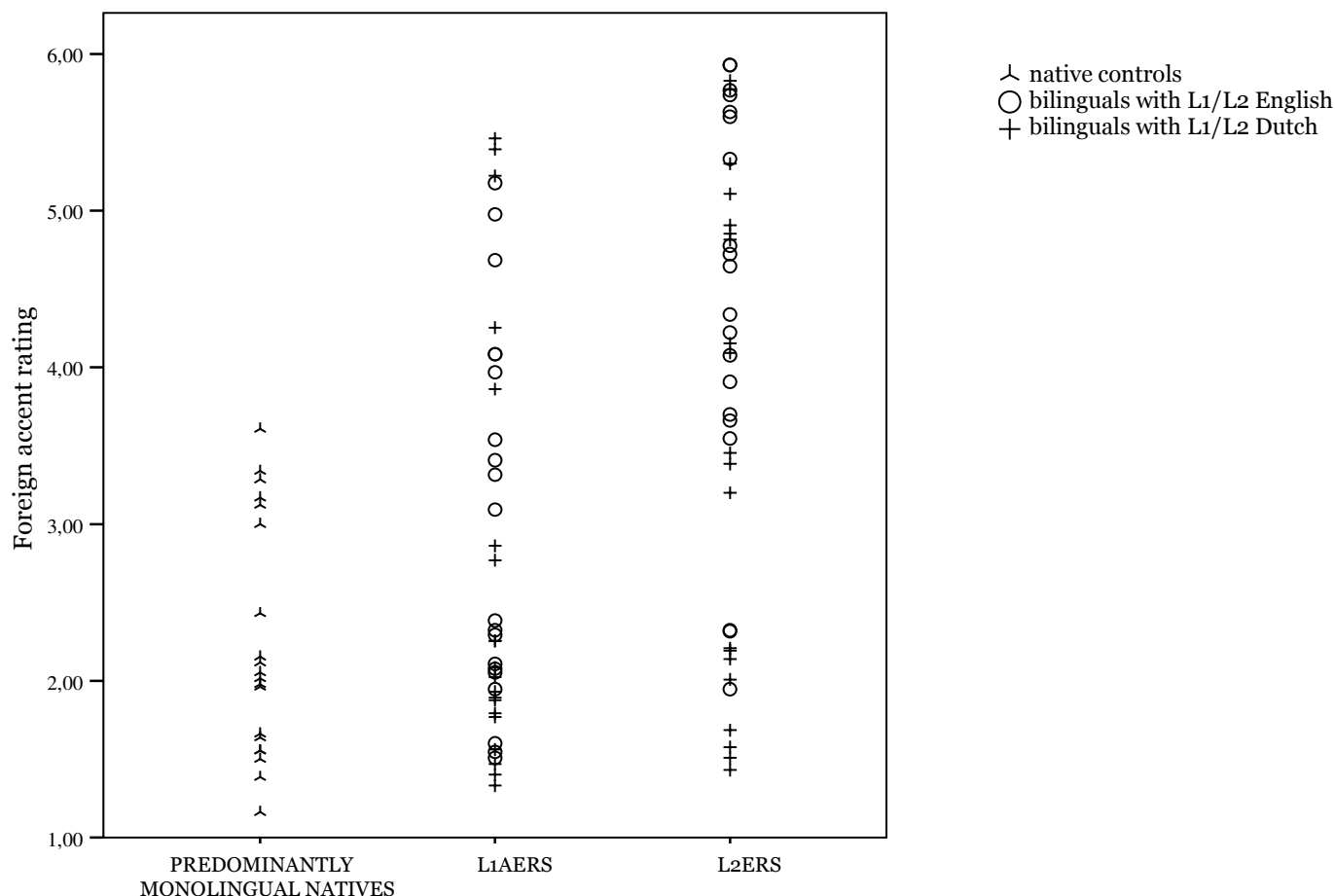


Fig. 2: Foreign accent ratings of 40 L1 attriters (L1AERS) and 40 L2 learners of German (L2ers) in comparison with 20 predominantly monolingual native speakers of German (from Hopp & Schmid, in press, their Fig. 5)

While the graph suggests that the L1 attriters cluster more towards the lower – the native – end of the scale, while more of the L2 learners are at the upper – the foreign – end (and this is in fact also what the statistics show), it becomes very clear that these results are not categorical: both of the bilingual groups are spread out over more or less the same range of perceived accents. Some bilinguals who had learned their first language in childhood, and who had lived in Germany until they were young adults, are no longer perceived as native speakers of that language by the na-

tive judges. On the other hand, some speakers who came to the German language later in life appear to have become native-like. This then means that even people who left the country where they grew up as adults cannot reliably be distinguished from foreigners once they have spent a certain time abroad.

The situation becomes yet more unstable when we look at people who were younger than that. It has often been found that children who emigrate in the company of their parents, or who are born in the country of migration but brought up with the heritage language, quite typically fail to attain native standards in adolescence or adulthood, and perform much more like second language learners. Often, they have comparatively low proficiency even according to those standards, even though parents have made every attempt to enforce the use of the ‘native’ language at home (see e.g. Montrul, 2008; Schmitt, 2010). The most striking findings in this respect come from an investigation of international adoptees conducted in Paris by Christophe Pallier and his team (Pallier et al., 2003). Pallier et al. studied a group of young adults who had been born in Korea but had been adopted by French parents when they were between 3 and 9 years old. What is really astonishing about this investigation is that, across the board, the researchers were unable to find *any trace* of the mother tongue. For example, they asked their participants to listen to the sequence of numbers from one to ten in various different languages that were unknown to them, such as Japanese, Polish, Wolof etc., plus, of course, Korean. The task for the participants consisted merely of indicating whether the language they had just heard was Korean or not. This the adoptees could not do: they did not perform any better on this task than French speakers who had never been exposed to Korean in their lives. Pallier and his colleagues also conducted fMRI scans of the adoptees’ brains while they listened to different languages, and here, too, they did not find that Korean activated anything more than other, entirely unfamiliar languages. The mother tongue of these speakers had apparently been entirely erased from their brains.

### *Determining ethnic origin*

The findings from both of the studies which I have just presented have a real and serious implication, because a *shibboleth*-type of test is being used today by many

countries, among which the Netherlands, in order to try and determine the origin of refugees. Many people who seek asylum do not have any documentation of their origins and citizenship. In cases where there is any doubt concerning the account they give of their history, the immigration authorities often employ a test called a 'language analysis' to try and determine whether they are telling the truth about their origin (in 2009 alone this was done around 1600 times, according to Maaïke Verrips of the organization *De Taalstudio*).

There is a large body of work by linguists which critically reflects the tool of language analyses in this context. Among the problems mentioned are issues of dialectology and, in particular, prestige: often a speaker will feel that in a formal situation, such as an interview conducted by an official agency, the use of a supraregional standard variety of a language is appropriate. He or she may therefore feel extremely uncomfortable using the local or national variety of the language, and this unease may obscure the true command (e.g. Kulk, 2008). Furthermore, the structure of the interview, which is usually based on a list of standard questions, is not conducive to the kind of free and naturalistic language use upon which such assessments should be based (ten Thije, 2008). An in-depth discussion of both legal and linguistic problems with respect to language analysis is beyond the scope of this piece, but detailed treatments of a variety of aspects can be found in Zwaan (ed., 2008) and Zwaan, Verrips and Muysken (eds, 2010).

The issue of language attrition, however, has not yet been invoked as a problem for language analysis to my knowledge. Given the findings presented above, I believe that knowledge of this research and its findings is highly relevant in the context of language analysis, in particular since this tool is used to assess the origin of children from the age of four years (ten Thije, 2008) and also to re-evaluate the claims of asylum seekers who have in the past been granted asylum (de Munnik, 2008).

### *Language attrition among children*

Where language analysis of children is concerned (in particular but not exclusively in those cases where the children come to the new country without the company of an

adult caretaker), it is vital to point out that the deterioration of the first language can take place astonishingly rapidly, as longitudinal investigations of international adoptees, such as the one presented by Isurin (2000), suggest. Isurin reports a case study of a Russian child adopted (at age 9) by American parents who asked the researcher (a native Russian speaker) to provide regular interaction with the child in her L1. Her attempts notwithstanding, Isurin reports a rapid breakdown of first language proficiency, which after a relatively short period (around one year) was followed by a refusal of the subject to interact at all in Russian with the investigator. In general, extremely rapid loss (over a space of months or even weeks) of the ability and willingness to use the L1 appears to be a hallmark of international adoption (e.g. Glennen & Masters, 2002, see also the overview in Hyltenstam, Bylund, Abrahamsson & Park, 2009).

Similarly, German Jews who were rescued from Nazi Germany on the so-called *Kindertransporte* after the pogrom of Nov. 9<sup>th</sup>, 1938, and placed in English-speaking foster families recall losing German so quickly (within months or even weeks) that correspondence with their parents who had remained in Germany became severely impaired (as, for example, recounted in the documentary film *Into the Arms of Strangers* and in autobiographies such as Milton, 2005). Quite apart from other concerns that have been raised regarding language analysis among children (ten Thije, 2008) it would therefore be imperative to conduct the language analysis literally within days of arrival in the country where asylum is being applied for, and that is not possible for practical reasons.<sup>1</sup>

### *Attrition across time*

Concerning the case of refugees who have already been granted asylum at an earlier date but whose account is re-assessed by means of language analysis, similar limitations apply. In such cases (but again not necessarily limited to these) the speaker has left the country of origin, and thus the linguistic environment where the L1 was spoken, a considerable time ago. He or she may therefore no longer be perceivable as a

<sup>1</sup> A further obstacle that may be legally relevant is that in such a case, due to the expected rapid deterioration of the native language, the counter-expertise that the refugee is entitled to have performed in the case of a negative assessment is impossible: by the time the result of the assessment is communicated, the 'native' status may already have been lost by the child.

native, so that language analysis may not provide reliable results. In this context it would be important to know during which time period language attrition takes place. This, however, has to date not been established, although there are indications that the bulk of linguistic change may happen fairly early on, within the first few years of migration (Schmid, 2011). What has been shown is that after a migration span of 10 years or more, length of residence no longer correlates with attrition phenomena, which also points to attrition as a fairly rapid process (Köpke & Schmid, 2004; Schmid, 2011).

### *Traumatisation*

One last issue has to be mentioned in the case of perceived nativeness and linguistic deterioration of the first language among asylum seekers, namely the impact of traumatisation. Linguistic research to date rather counterintuitively suggests that language attrition is in general not or only very slightly affected by external factors, such as the frequency of use of the language in question or the attitude towards the native and host language and culture. A series of large-scale empirical investigations of the attrition of a range of native languages investigating linguistic habits and language and cultural attitudes in detail has failed to find any correlations between how often a speaker uses his or her first language, how they feel towards it, and how they perform on a wide range of linguistic tasks (e.g. Cherciov 2010; Dostert 2009; Keijzer 2007; Schmid 2007; Yilmaz, in prep).

There is one notable exception to this pattern, namely the investigation of first language attrition, use and maintenance among German-Jewish refugees who escaped Nazi persecution in the 1930s, reported by Schmid (2002). In this study it is clearly shown that the extent of traumatisation that an individual was exposed to can impact heavily on maintenance or deterioration of the first language. Those speakers investigated in this study who had experienced events such as the pogrom of Nov. 9<sup>th</sup>, 1938, performed significantly worse on all measures of nativeness than those who had left relatively early on after the Nazi seizure of power, and thus not been traumatized to the same extent. The results from this study thus suggest that a ‘genuine’ asylum seeker, who by definition will have experienced trauma and hardship, may come

to be perceived as less native-like than someone with less difficult memories. It is evident that such findings are highly relevant in the context of language analysis as a determinant of origin.

*Practical examples of the problems of language analysis*

Over the past few years, I have sometimes been contacted by lawyers representing asylum seekers whose account was thrown in doubt by their inability to use their ‘native’ language in ways that the immigration authorities considered appropriate. In the guidelines for this analysis, it is asserted that the practice of language analysis is based on the underlying assumption that “if someone has spent a substantial part of his [sic] life in a certain area, in particular his youth (where early language acquisition takes place) he may be expected to speak at least one of the language varieties that are commonly used in that area”<sup>2</sup>.

For example, the first case I was consulted in was of a 30-year old man whom I shall refer to as Mr. A. He was born in Somalia but escaped from there, together with his mother, when he was 10. They then lived in Saudi-Arabia and quickly switched to speaking Arabic. He came to the Netherlands 3 years ago and applied for asylum, and he no longer speaks or understands the Somali language. This was initially interpreted as evidence that his account was untrue, as it was asserted that, given his history, Mr. A. should be a proficient speaker of Somali. Based on a sociolinguistic interview conducted with the help of a linguistic and personal background questionnaire developed within the language attrition research group (which is available on [www.let.rug.nl/languageattrition](http://www.let.rug.nl/languageattrition)), I came to the conclusion that the loss of the native language in this specific case should by no means be considered exceptional or surprising. It was of vital importance for both son and mother to acquire Arabic as quickly as possible, as both had to work among other speakers of Arabic and there were no remaining ties to Somalia (the speaker’s grandparents and father having all passed away). Under such circumstances, a child will lose the native language almost

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<sup>2</sup> “Taalanalyse gaat uit van de volgende vooronderstelling: als iemand het grootste deel van zijn leven in een bepaald gebied heeft doorgebracht, en met name zijn jeugd (waarin vroege taalverwerving plaatsvindt), mag verwacht worden dat hij ten minste één van de taalvarianten spreekt die in dit gebied gangbaar zijn.” (Vakbijlage taalanalyse, Ministerie van Justitie, Immigratie- en Naturalisatiedienst ct. after Zwaan (eds.) 2008. English translation in main text is mine).

by necessity. This assessment was accepted by the court where Mr. A had appealed against the original rejection of his application, and he was eventually granted asylum.

Another case is that of a 22-year old man who was born in Eritrea, but escaped to Ethiopia at age 8 and was taken in by a foster family there – a case, therefore, that is very much comparable to that of the Korean adoptees investigated by Pallier et al. Again, it was originally affirmed that it is not credible that this man should be unable to speak the Tigrinya language he had grown up with. In this case it appears even more clearly that the assumption that one will always retain the language that one learned as a child is not necessarily true, since a consolidation period that extends at least beyond the onset of puberty is necessary to render this knowledge stable.

A last case I want to mention here is of a slightly different nature: it concerns a 17-year old boy whom I shall refer to as M. He came to the Netherlands from Angola when he was 9 years old, and has lived in a Dutch foster family ever since. He made a huge effort to learn Dutch quickly and well, but completely forgot his native Portuguese. His request for asylum has now been denied, but he and his foster family are trying to make the case that it is unethical to deport a 17-year old, alone, to a country where he does not speak the language. Again, it is argued by the authorities that this claim is probably a lie, and that, given his history, M. should command Portuguese. Unfortunately in this case my assessment that the loss of the native language was credible under such circumstances was not accepted by the authorities, and M. is about to be deported as I write this.

To my mind, this case is similar to one that made the Dutch news not long ago, of a girl from Afghanistan who was to be deported back to her home country after an extended stay in the Netherlands. After a great deal of public debate, the Dutch minister for integration, Gerd Leers, introduced a change in policy allowing some girls and young women of Afghan origin to remain in the Netherlands, if they had integrated into a society which considers women equal to men (at least on paper) to the extent that they can no longer function in Afghan society. I wholeheartedly applaud this rul-

ing, but would hold that a similar case can be made for young asylum seekers who, during their sojourn in the Netherlands, their acquisition of Dutch, and their education in the Dutch system have lost their first language. In particular cases such as the one of the Angolan boy M., where there are no parents or caretakers who can look after him upon his return, deporting him back to Angola where he will be unable to communicate and have no assistance to master his daily life seems equally inhumane as does returning girls who are accustomed to Western freedom to a country where women's rights are severely curtailed.

### *Conclusion*

To sum up: when it comes to speakers who leave the country where they grew up after puberty, they can no longer be reliably identified as natives after a period abroad. Younger children, even if they emigrate in the company of their parents, often experience quite drastic loss of their first language, and children who emigrate alone almost invariably forget it completely within months. These findings should inform the practice of language analysis to determine the origin of asylum seekers, and be used to assess whether or not such an analysis can indeed provide a reliable result in any individual case.

I would therefore like to end with a word of warning: Never trust a shibboleth!

### *Acknowledgements*

The guidelines for the oratie communicated by the rector which I referred to in the beginning contained a second important rule: no words of thanks were to be included. I had been unaware of this rule, and had already been rehearsing my own version of the Oscar acceptance speech (and was getting quite good at sobbing rather prettily). The thanks may, however, be included in the written version, and so I would like to thank a number of people.

First of all my parents, who supported me through more than 25 years of formal education. 'Support' here does include the financial aspect, for which I remain deeply grateful, but encompasses far more fundamental matters of belief, trust and respect, which I have been exceptionally lucky to have had. I was very happy that they were



both able to attend the inaugural, as was my sister Steffi and her husband Dirk (and sad that my second sister Kathrin was unable to make it). I was also touched that my cousin Frieder and my sisters-in-law Jane and Sandy undertook the travels to our very remote corner of Northwest Europe to be there for that day.

From within the Netherlands a number of my former colleagues with whom I had worked at the VU Amsterdam between 2000 and 2007 also came to Groningen for the day, and this touched me immensely. I was fortunate to have them all as co-workers in my first ‘proper’ academic job. And I consider myself equally fortunate to work in the company of my current colleagues in the English department, the Faculty of Arts, and the wider context of the university of Groningen – in particular my fellow Rosalind Franklin fellows and members and alumni of De Jonge Akademie of the KNAW. Most of all, I’m grateful to my present and former students and PhD students, who make the research and the teaching a delight.

I would also like to thank Kees de Bot for his kind, warm, funny and touching laudatio.

Save the best for last: I would not have been able to do any of the things I did nor attain any of the positions I have held without the love and support of my husband, Chris McCully. And, as Kees pointed out, both Chris and I would be nowhere without Tessa the labrador.

*Ik heb gezegd.*

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There is a widespread assumption that native speakers of a language are able to identify, when listening to others, whether these are also native speakers or whether they have learned it as a foreign language later in life. There are numerous accounts, the earliest of which is the use of the word Shibboleth as an identifier mentioned in the Old Testament (Judges 12:5-6), of speakers using this ability in order to determine a speaker's ethnicity. In recent years, a similar technique has been used by many countries in order to assess, in the absence of other documentation, whether political refugees and asylum seekers have given a true account of their origins.

It is argued here that this method of determining origin can be unreliable. Monika Schmid presents evidence that migrants cannot reliably be differentiated in their first language from those who are second language learners. In particular those who have left their environment at a relatively young age, and/or have suffered traumata, can lose their native language entirely. She concludes that the assumption that, if you have spent your formative years speaking a language, you will always retain knowledge of that language and be recognisable as a native speaker of it, is wrong.

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