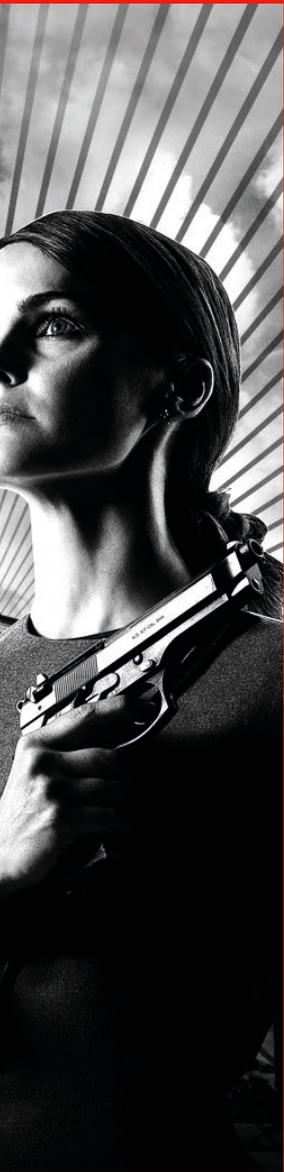




TARGET: ACCENT

Mission impossible for language users?

Justyna Kozyra-Bober investigates whether mastering a new accent is mission possible for late learners, as TV spy drama *The Americans* suggests.



The Cold War intrigues, complicated marriages, and fashion staples of the '80s make *The Americans* a dramatic and entertaining watch. But is it believable? With another season of FX's political drama approaching, let's look at the question from a linguistic point of view.

The Americans tells the story of two Soviet KGB spies living undercover as an all-American couple. In flashbacks to their late adolescent years in the USSR,

also know many people who started learning a language at a later stage and never mastered a foreign accent, even after years spent in the target country. Is there any science behind this intuitive observation?

The older you get, the more unlikely you are to develop a native accent

A number of theories hold that youth is important or even indispensable in the acquisition of native pronunciation. The critical period hypothesis advanced in the 1960s by biologist Eric Lenneberg states

lost more gradually and may extend beyond puberty.

The closure of the critical period has also been linked to the loss of access to universal grammar, the innate language ability responsible for language development. Robert Bley-Vroman's fundamental difference hypothesis explains that late second language learners must rely on their native language knowledge (through which they reconstruct universal grammar) and on their general problem-solving skills, which makes the mastery of foreign languages at a native-speaker level virtually impossible. What also follows from the hypothesis is that the knowledge of one's native language will affect the learning of a foreign language and that languages typologically closer to the native tongue will be easier to learn.

The interference of the native tongue with the target language is also said to contribute to the foreign accent in the speech of late learners. According to James Flege's unfolding hypothesis, the better developed the acoustic system of the first language is at the time second-language learning begins, the more it will interfere with the second-language pronunciation. Once the native phonetic system is established (at age five to seven), learners tend to inaccurately interpret target-language sounds in terms of similar sounds in their first languages, which results in foreign-accented speech.

Affective factors, i.e., certain emotions and attitudes (such as anxiety or self-confidence) might also influence the process of second-language acquisition. Stephen Krashen's affective filter hypothesis and John Schumann's concept of psychological distance explain that adults reach lower



"In flashbacks to their late adolescent years in the USSR, we can hear them speak English with heavy Russian accents. Yet the Jenningses, the perfect couple, are somehow able to switch to flawless American English in the US."

we can hear them speak English with heavy Russian accents. Yet the Jenningses, the perfect couple, are somehow able to switch to flawless American English in the US. Could the language training they received as young adults in the USSR and the years spent in America be enough to rid them of any traces of a Russian accent, which does not slip out even in emotional moments? Common observation will probably tell you otherwise. Think of your own acquaintances, friends, or family. You might know someone who was immersed in another language from childhood and now can pass for a native. However, you probably

that there is a critical time for language acquisition. This period ends at puberty, when brain functions become fully assigned to specific portions of the brain and the organ loses its flexibility. This means that adolescents and adults are not able to acquire languages in the way that children can. According to Lenneberg, the window of opportunity for accent acquisition closes at age nine or ten. Phonology cut-off age claims supported by foreign language researchers usually range from six to fifteen. Some researchers argue for a less radical view called the sensitive period hypothesis, which claims that the ability is

levels of second-language proficiency than children due to the strengthening of the affective filter around puberty. This limits adults' interactions with native speakers as well as the benefits from the input they do receive. The filter is said to rarely go low enough for adults to achieve native-like proficiency in a target language.

What happens in real life?

Empirical evidence to date has shown that the timing of the first significant genuine exposure to the foreign language – usually age upon arrival in the target country – has a profound impact on the 'nativeness' of pronunciation. Although many age-related and age-independent factors might influence the degree of accent – length of residence in the target country, quantity and quality of input, knowledge and use of native language, affective aspects, language aptitude – the age upon arrival is usually viewed as the strongest predictor. Most studies do not specify if their subjects received formal language instruction before emigrating (as, presumably, the Jenningses did). However, there is little evidence to date that formal home-country instruction has a significant effect on the degree of foreign accent, with some experiments suggesting there is no relation between the two.

A number of studies relying on a variety of elicitation techniques – usually a combination of read-alouds and free speech – have shown that late learners are very unlikely to achieve native pronunciation in a second language. Susan Oyama's study of 60 Italian immigrants published reported that a substantial foreign accent started appearing among those learners who came to the US after about

age twelve. Likewise, Alene Moyer's study of 25 educated immigrants to Germany from various backgrounds revealed that no one with an age of first exposure above twelve scored in a definitely native/native/ perhaps native range. A decline in the ability to acquire a native accent around age fifteen was noted in Mark Patkowski's article discussing the syntactic proficiency of 67 immigrants to the US with diverse first-language backgrounds. Elsewhere, James Flege and Ian MacKay reported that early Italian arrivals in Canada who rarely used their native tongues performed identically to native speakers on vowel perception tests, while late learners, regardless of how often they used Italian, scored significantly lower.

Research has also revealed that, although young age is essential, it is not sufficient to achieve native-like pronunciation. In some cases, accents may be detectable even among those who begin second-language acquisition as young children. In their seminal 1960s study of 71 Spanish-speaking immigrants to the US, James Asher and Ramiro Garcia established that even though those who arrived before the age of six performed best and those who immigrated at or over the age of 13 worst in producing an American-like accent, none of the subjects ever achieved a native accent. Irene Thompson's 1991-published study of 36 Russian immigrants revealed that learners who came to the US before age ten had more American-sounding accents than the subjects who came later, with those arriving at age four having the least accented speech – though again, not accent free.

In light of this data, we can conclude that it is virtually impossible that the Jenningses could have somehow acquired perfect American accents. Are there any studies indicating otherwise?

Evidence shows that adults can master a new accent! But does it really...?

Indeed, a few researchers have reported cases where adult language learners have been able to pass for natives. However, those studies do not confirm that the Jenningses could learn to speak with perfect American accents at all times, because these experiments involved very limited elicitation techniques and tasks (self-reports, imitation, delayed repetition, or decontextualized reading), sometimes collected under strictly controlled conditions (prior intensive training or rehearsals), with some raising additional methodological concerns.

An imitation test was used in Gerald Neufeld's study of 20 Canadian adults under intensive training of Chinese and Japanese, while a delayed repetition technique in a study of 240 Italian immigrants to Canada conducted by James Flege and his colleagues. In the former experiment, 40% (for Chinese) and 45% (for Japanese) of subjects were judged as native speakers, while in the latter study, 6% of the late learners were rated as natives. Read-aloud tasks were used to assess pronunciation in experiments by Theo Bongaerts and David Birdsong. The former involved 30 late language learners with various first backgrounds acquiring Dutch naturally in the Netherlands, and the latter 22 late English learners of French living in Paris. In both studies, two subjects



1980s sitcom *Allo Allo Allo* played on French and German stereotypes, with some pretty dodgy foreign accents as part of the humour.

performed in the range of native speakers across judges/multiple criteria. In another study by Bongaerts, involving two experiments based mainly on read-aloud speech samples, the pronunciation scores of some of the highly advanced Dutch late learners of English living in the Netherlands were within the range of those obtained by native speakers. The first experiment included a free speech sample edited to 16-20 seconds, while its replication allowed for a rehearsal of tested items. Additionally, both studies are hardly generalizable due to the typological closeness of the language pair investigated and the robust presence of English in the Dutch media.

A comprehensive study of two English adult learners of Arabic, utilizing a variety of tests, reported the successful acquisition of a second language. However, it seems that although both of the subjects examined by Georgette Loup and her colleagues performed very well, some judges were able to distinguish their pronunciation from that of native speakers on a speech-production task.

Research to date showing that one can master a native accent at a later age should be viewed with caution and is in need of

careful and modified replication. At best, it currently shows that a late second-language learner can sound native under very specific circumstances. In order for studies to be generalizable to what late starters can do in terms of accent in real, meaningful communication, they should make use of, among other things, methodologies which involve a wide range of isolated and contextualized tasks, including free speech.

Flawless accents make the show flawed

Since phonological proficiency seems to decline with age of significant, first-hand exposure to the second language, it is quite unlikely that older adolescent/adult starters – whether through KGB training, immersion in the target country, or any other conditions – would be able to achieve a perfect native accent and use it consistently in natural circumstances. Whether those conditions would realistically allow the Jenningses to master English syntax and morphology to the native level depicted in the show might be material for another exciting discussion (studies on the correlation of age and the acquisition of language components other than phonology are more optimistic

for adults). In any case, in spite of the credulity-stretching suppression of Russian accents by the main characters of *The Americans*, the chance to see a Welsh actor pretending to be Russian pretending to be American is a must for any linguist! ¶

Find out more

Articles

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Eric Lenneberg (1967) *Biological Foundations of Language*, New York: John Wiley and Sons.

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Justyna Kozyra-Bober manages the EducationUSA Center in Warsaw, and educational and cultural scholar exchange programs to the US at the Polish-US Fulbright Commission. In the past, she has worked as a global language lead, translator/editor and EFL teacher. She is a World Fellowship recipient from Delta Kappa Gamma International for Key Women Educators, a Fulbright alumna (University of Texas at Austin, College of Education), and a graduate of the University of Warsaw's Institute of English Studies (linguistics and American studies).