

## **Childhood separation and birth language forgetting**

Monika S. Schmid, University of York

Childhood languages are known to be highly vulnerable to forgetting when there is a sudden change in input. Even children who have developed fully age-appropriately in either the home or the majority language will experience extremely rapid and complete attrition of this language once exposure is reduced or ceases. Such a change in exposure can occur even for children with a happy and stable home life, for example because parents are advised by well-meaning teachers, social workers, health care providers, strangers in the street, and other linguistics experts to stop using the home language since – as is well known – this will negatively affect the development of the majority language. The outcome, however, is usually exactly the reverse: the majority language does not benefit, but the home language will deteriorate sharply, even if the child had developed fully age-appropriately up until the point that it is no longer used. Similarly, children who grew up in a bilingual setting, with one language spoken in the home and another in their environment can lose the latter fast once the family returns to the parents' linguistic environment (the case of 'returnees', e.g. Flores & Snape, 2021).

While the loss of proficiency in the language that the child seemed to have mastered is often unexpected and regretted later in life in such otherwise benign circumstances, repercussions can be lifelong and add to an already considerable psychological burden in cases where changes in input in birth or childhood languages have occurred as a result of the separation of a child from one or both their parents. The circumstances of such separations are almost invariably tragic – they can range from an acrimonious divorce through safeguarding issues that lead to the child being taken into foster care to the child having to flee from a region of conflict. Against the heartbreak and trauma involved in such upheavals, the loss of the birth language is usually considered a minor inconvenience – and little to no thought is given by the providers of care to ways in which it could be preserved.

Survivors of this kind of childhood trauma, however, very often later in life experience a need to reconnect to their birth parents and families, and this need can be thwarted by the lack of a common language. To date, the study of birth, childhood and heritage languages has given little consideration to the lifelong consequences of being linguistically uprooted in this way.

In this talk, I will present an overview of the available evidence on the loss of childhood languages. I will then give some preliminary insights from two new studies: the first investigates multilingualism in the British foster system, and the second traces the linguistic development of child and adult refugees from Ukraine.

### Reference

Flores, C., & Snape, N. (2021). Language attrition and heritage language reversal in returnees. In: Montrul, S. & Polinsky, M. (Eds). *The Cambridge handbook of heritage languages and linguistics* (pp. 351-371). CUP.