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FIRST LANGUAGE ATTRITION

Can we forget our mother language? What causes it to happen? Sophie Hardach and Aditi Thombre suggest that it is indeed possible, even for adults.

Firstly, it's crucial to understand how babies learn a language. Aditi Thombre explains that even before birth, they can differentiate around 800 sounds! The brains of newborns are primed to grasp language. While children may not form grammatically correct sentences initially, this falls within the critical period, which spans from infancy to pre-teen years. The process of language acquisition varies slightly for those exposed to a completely new language.

Why does language attrition occur, and who does it affect? One group includes wartime refugees. Sophie Hardach notes that German-Jewish refugees suppressed their German language skills due to trauma. Some who fled after the 1938 Reichskristallnacht not only struggled to speak their mother tongue but also completely forgot it. The duration abroad isn't crucial; it's the intensity of trauma. Some German-Jewish migrants feel detached from their homeland due to past pain. Thus, the human psyche may suppress language associated with triggering memories.

Another affected group comprises adults and children. According to Thombre, there's a noticeable contrast between children and adults regarding language attrition. Forgetting one's first language is a natural process crucial for survival in new environments, particularly evident in adopted children relocating with their new families. Children are more susceptible due to their neuroplasticity and lack of exposure to their mother tongue in their new surroundings.

Migrants constitute the final group where first language attrition is possible. Sophie Hardach suggests that those naturally adept in languages tend to preserve their native tongue better. Learning a new language initiates a cognitive switch in our brains. For instance, when faced with a table, we choose between words like English 'table' and Ukrainian 'стіл'. Engaging with an English speaker suppresses 'стіл', favoring the English term. However, weak mechanisms may lead to word-finding difficulties.

Hardach further examines a study on how attrition operates. Two groups of long-term migrants are compared: Spaniards in the UK and Cubans in the US. While Spaniards were isolated from their native language, Cubans spoke Spanish predominantly. Results showed that Spaniards maintained their Spanish fluency, whereas Cubans experienced attrition, adopting linguistic features of the new environment.

In conclusion, language attrition is a natural process, neither inherently "good" nor "bad". It's normal for the brain to prune unused neural connections. Language is deeply intertwined with our brain, culture, and personality, making it disheartening to forget. However, it's reversible; a visit to one's homeland can help rekindle linguistic abilities.

Перелік посилань:

1. Hardach S. Can you lose your native language? *BBC Home - Breaking News, World News, US News, Sports, Business, Innovation, Climate, Culture, Travel, Video & Audio*. URL: <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20180606-can-you-lose-your-native-language> (date of access: 23.03.2024).

2. Thombre A. Can you forget your first language? *Science ABC*. URL: <https://www.scienceabc.com/humans/can-you-forget-your-first-language.html> (date of access: 23.03.2024).