

## Losing and regaining a childhood language

### What this research was about and why it is important

Migration has a deep impact on people's lives, particularly those of children. How immigrant children's language competence develops is an important question for language researchers. Answering this question can shed light on how the linguistic environment surrounding children influences their language development. In this study, the researcher analyzed the knowledge of grammar for individuals who spent part of their childhood in an immigrant setting (that is, surrounded by a majority language outside the home but continuing to speak their home language) and subsequently, still during their childhood or adolescence, returned to their parents' homeland (so-called "child returnees"). The researcher found that the child returnees "lost" some command of the majority language that they had learned outside the home while in the immigration setting. However, there was one child who then went *back* to the country of immigration in which she had spent some of her childhood, and quickly regained what seemed to have been lost.

### What the researchers did

- The researcher interviewed 14 returnees of Portuguese origin who had lived in Germany for part of their childhood and then returned to Portugal (their parents' homeland) between the ages of 7 and 13.
  - The children had been born in or immigrated as infants to Germany and lived there for 6–13 years.
  - Upon their return to Portugal, all their use of German stopped.
- The researcher also interviewed one participant who had immigrated to Germany at the age of 2, then returned to Portugal at the age of 9, and subsequently relocated back to Germany when she was 13. In other words, this child was "re-immersed" in the German-speaking environment after living in Portugal for 4 years.
- All of the interviews were carried out in German. They were transcribed and coded.
- The researcher focused on the children's knowledge of German, which had been the majority language (their language used outside the home) while living in Germany. The researcher analyzed the children's production of German grammar, namely, how they produced plural, gender, and case marking.
  - The focus of analysis was grammar errors, calculated per child.
  - For the re-immersed child, grammar errors were calculated at two time points: after she had resided in Portugal for almost one year and after she had been re-immersed in the German context for approximately one year.

### What the researchers found

- Overall, the 14 children who returned to Portugal from Germany as children showed some loss of their German grammar (i.e., they produced errors in their grammar).
  - The children who were younger than 12 at the time of their return to Portugal and had lived in Germany for 6–9 years produced high rates of grammar errors in German.
  - The degree of German grammar loss (i.e., the amounts of errors produced) was not related to the children's length of residence in Portugal.
- As for the "re-immersed" child, after one year back in Portugal, this child produced high rates of grammar errors in German, but regained her German language skills almost completely after returning to Germany.

### Things to consider

- Children's knowledge of grammar seems to be sensitive to changes in the surrounding linguistic environment.
- Knowledge (of some aspects) of grammar might become stable after 10 to 13 years of children's regular contact with a language. Losing contact with a language before around this age range might lead to children experiencing some language loss.
- However, a child's previously known language is not fully erased from memory; its knowledge can be quickly reactivated after regaining contact with the language.
- For language skills to develop consistently, children might need constant contact with all their languages.