

Use it or lose it? Study suggests the brain can remember a 'forgotten' language

September 24 2009

Many of us learn a foreign language when we are young, but in some cases, exposure to that language is brief and we never get to hear or practice it subsequently. Our subjective impression is often that the neglected language completely fades away from our memory. But does "use it or lose it" apply to foreign languages? Although it may seem we have absolutely no memory of the neglected language, new research suggests this "forgotten" language may be more deeply engraved in our minds than we realize.

Psychologists Jeffrey Bowers, Sven L. Mattys, and Suzanne Gage from the University of Bristol recruited volunteers who were native English speakers but who had learned either Hindi or Zulu as children when living abroad. The researchers focused on Hindi and Zulu because these languages contain certain phonemes that are difficult for native English speakers to recognize. A phoneme is the smallest sound in a language—a group of phonemes forms a word.

The scientists asked the volunteers to complete a background vocabulary test to see if they remembered any words from the neglected language. They then trained the participants to distinguish between pairs of phonemes that started Hindi or Zulu words.

As it turned out, even though the volunteers showed no memory of the [second language](#) in the vocabulary test, they were able to quickly relearn and correctly identify phonemes that were spoken in the neglected language.

These findings, which appeared in a recent issue of [Psychological Science](#), a journal of the Association for Psychological Science, suggest that exposing young children to foreign languages, even if they do not continue to speak them, can have a lasting impact on [speech perception](#). The authors conclude, "Even if the language is forgotten (or feels this way) after many years of disuse, leftover traces of the early exposure can manifest themselves as an improved ability to relearn the language."

Source: Association for Psychological Science ([news](#) : [web](#))

Citation: Use it or lose it? Study suggests the brain can remember a 'forgotten' language (2009, September 24) retrieved 4 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2009-09-brain-forgotten-language.html>

<p>This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.</p>
