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How many languages could a child speak?

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If a newborn child grows up hearing people speaking in many different languages, will it later be able to speak all those languages?



Children learn languages from the people around them. If they are exposed to multiple languages, they may grow up bilingual or multilingual. These kinds of environments are not unusual; the consensus among linguists is that a majority of children in the world grow up hearing multiple languages.

So, what if a child were raised in an environment where they were exposed to dozens or hundreds of languages? We can imagine an Oliver Twist-type character, growing up in some sort of hypothetical global train station, interacting with a rotating cast of station employees and visitors from all over the world. Could such a child become omnilingual?

Probably not, said Suzy Styles, a developmental psychologist at Nanyang Technological University in Singapore who studies language acquisition. One obstacle is time. The more languages you're exposed to, the less exposure you have to each one. If you're learning 365 languages in a year, you can't have more than one full day of exposure to each one.

Our scenario also leaves out something fundamental, Styles said: what the child wants. Children aren't just sponges that absorb everything around them. (If they were, meal times would be a lot easier.) They pay attention to the world and develop feelings and opinions about it, and that plays a big role in how they learn.

"Kids are motivated by watching others use their language together," Styles said. "And they are generally motivated to use those languages that they see having the greatest social impact."

If a nondescript traveller wanders through the station speaking an unfamiliar language and no one pays attention to them, the child probably won't either. But if someone really cool shows up speaking Icelandic or ancient Minoan, and everyone turns to look, the child will notice.

If people seem excited to talk to the newcomer, the child may get the impression that the language is cool and desirable to know. Children pay more attention to the speech of people they're interested in and the people they want to imitate.

In other words, to learn lots of languages, kids don't just need exposure, they need motivation.

"One place particularly well known for its linguistic density is the highlands of Papua New Guinea," Styles said, "where being able to communicate in several neighbouring languages is a great social advantage." In situations like those, she said, children can learn to communicate fluently in a wide variety of languages.

So if you want to encourage a child to learn a lot of languages, you need to expose them to many of them — and make those languages seem desirable, even cool.

How do you do that? Well, I honestly might not be the best person to ask. Despite my best efforts, "How to make something seem cool to kids at school" is a skill I never did get the hang of.