Language loss during the '5-to-7 shift'

June 18, 2004

Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), the father of psychoanalysis, was interested in the fact that people cannot remember very much about the first several years of their lives. This inability is called "childhood amnesia."

You can verify it for yourself. What is your earliest memory? Most people cannot remember anything before about age 3, and for many people, the earliest event they can remember comes from when they were 5 or 6.

A good scientist looks with a sense of wonder at what the rest of us take for granted. Thus Freud expressed wonder at childhood amnesia. He observed that when we are young, we participate whole-heartedly in vivid experiences, manifesting human pain and pleasure and expressing love, jealousy and fear. We seem to participate fully in social life. Why, then, can we not remember these things? We are like amnesiacs, cut off from memories of the most formative and passionate years of our lives.

Freud's first hypothesis was that young children are so preoccupied with dangerous topics, such as sex, that these thoughts are later repressed when the ego-driven (socially acceptable) mind takes over. The problem with this hypothesis is that the things we do remember from early years are not all bland and safe, but sometimes contain elements of shock, danger or even sex.

Freud's first hypothesis was later supplemented with the idea that society-driven reality pervades the thoughts of the older child. In this new reality, there is little room for the magical thinking of the younger child. Thus, at the same time that the child becomes suspicious of the reality of Santa Claus, the whole mass of childish thoughts that included Santa Claus begin to be buried under more readily accessible thoughts.

It is not that the early memories are gone altogether. Many can be retrieved under hypnosis. It is just that early memories do not fit the mold of the child's later construction of reality. Recall is a process of selective reconstruction employing the framework of reality that the child has developed.

The 5-to-7 Shift

A major stage of fixing the world in one's mind occurs during what developmental psychologists refer to as the *5 to 7 shift*. This is a change that permits children to do (at last) many of the things that parents and teachers have been wanting them to do, such as taking responsibility for tasks, remembering things systematically, sitting still in school and finding their way home. The 5-to-7 shift is also an occasion for a major upgrade of the thinking process.

First-grade teachers are experts on the 5-to-7 shift. They always get some students who are still on the wrong side of it, and their job includes facilitating the shift. A recent news story about primary schools in Tachikawa, western Tokyo, concerned the "shoichi problem" (children who, unable to adapt to classroom behavior, walk around and talk during class). The story said that teaching has become so difficult that some teachers are reluctant to take charge of first-grade classes.

The problem was blamed on family and community failure to raise children properly, and suggested that extra teachers—"school life supporters"—be hired to help out in large classes. A more conservative solution would be to train new teachers to expect and cope with students who have not yet undergone the coming shift. Another possibility is to make classes smaller so that teachers could apply their natural skills.

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No matter how much parents and teachers might want 6-year-olds to sit still and learn, some of them cannot do it yet. If they could, the all-important competition for educational advantage would put pressure on schools to start the first grade at age 5 rather than age 6. We have here a hard fact of human development, not a product of inadequate parental or social training.

My daughter Nami has just turned 7 years old. She has been going through a number of changes while systematizing her understanding of the world. She asks questions and wants clear answers. Only facts will do. Some recent issues relating to Papa have been: Why is Papa called “Papa” and not something else? What factors makes Papa an “American”? How does Papa really, really feel about the fact that Nami is the smallest person in her class?

With the new highly structured and detailed world view comes a loss of the old magical thinking. Previously, Nami would have believed me if I told her that when we wake up in the morning, we'll all be butterflies. No longer. In her present world, some things are possible and many things are impossible. She checks the plausibility of everything.

There are losses and gains of language, too. Nami speaks mostly Japanese but has learned a lot of English. Words that we have continued to use remain in her active understanding. Others that we have not used for a year or two have disappeared. “Ceiling” used to be part of a hide-and-seek game and she understood it well. But we haven’t played that game for two years, and the word is no longer available to her. Similarly, “13,” which used to be part of the routine when I carried her down the stairs in our house, disappeared sometime after the carrying stopped.

Because she had known these words well, I lazily assumed that she would always know them. But they did not survive the 5-to-7 shift. While I was not attending to her English, some of it went underground.

Language Loss

Loraine Obler, professor at City University of New York, wrote that a whole language can disappear at this age. A colleague of hers, who had spoken fluent Hebrew until age 5, changed to a new environment where Hebrew was not spoken. She forgot all of it and developed fluent English. When, at age 18, she undertook to learn Hebrew, she had to learn it as a foreign language and, at age 34, “speaks it with a strong American accent.”

Emiko Yukawa, associate professor of Kyoto Notre Dame University, has carefully studied language loss and recovery. She wrote about a boy, Haruki, who had average or better-than-average native speaker skills in both Japanese and English when, at age 5-1/2, he was moved to a monolingual English-speaking environment in Hawaii.

After four months in Hawaii, Haruki had lost his ability to speak fluent Japanese. He said (in English) that when he tried to speak Japanese, “I have to search for every word in my brain. It takes two or three hours to search for the words I want to say. Then I have to cross out the words I don't want to say. I get so tired.”

Haruki returned to Japan after five months in Hawaii, and reentered his old preschool. On the first day, try as he might, he could hardly produce a sentence in Japanese. But Japanese came back very quickly, and after five weeks, it had reached what Yukawa called “its original complexity.”

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Yukawa wrote that apparently Haruki’s underlying knowledge of Japanese was not lost, but that his ability to call it into play, to “process” it, disappeared and then returned.

Language loss seems to occur throughout one’s life, but more at some times than at others. In my May 21 column, I described loss of vocabulary in very young children as a result of trading up. In this column, I have described language loss during the 5-to-7 shift.

Obler commented that scientists must try to explain what happens in the brain when languages are “lost,” and when they are recovered. We can observe the facts, and we even know to a large extent what to do about them (I'll write more about that in a future column). But clearly there is need for much more research.

This column aims to harmonize views of language teachers, theorists, parents and bureaucrats. Send e-mail to childs@tuj.ac.jp or letters to The Daily Yomiuri. The column will return on July 16. Childs, Ed.D., teaches in the Graduate College of Education and is a lecturer and program coordinator of Continuing Education at Temple University Japan, Tokyo.