

# Historical Linguistics and second language acquisition

by RAMY KHATTAB

**Learning a new language can be a daunting task for many, but a recent study by University of British Columbia (UBC) English professor James Stratton, suggests that understanding language history may hold the key to more effective language learning.**

Stratton, a historical linguist who works on second language acquisition, is not alone in finding language history useful. Several scholars have called for the integration of historical linguistics into the second-language classroom for several years. Since few studies had tested its effect empirically, Stratton's study, recently published in the journal *The Modern Language Journal*, investigates the relationship between knowledge of language history and second language acquisition.

"I found that making explicit connections to knowledge you already have can accelerate the learning process," he explains.

His study used two sections of a third-semester university German course. "One section was exposed to English-German cognates through traditional

language instruction following the dominant approach in North America (... ) that emphasizes learning through communicative tasks and thus context," he says. "The second section spent the same amount of time learning about the cognates but received explicit instruction on language history."

The study focused on vocabulary learning, focusing on cognates, and words that trace back to the same ancestral form. "For instance, German Hund (dog) and English hound are cognates because they trace back to the Germanic word hundaz. When you look at the words and their meaning, you can clearly see that they are related in some way," says Stratton.

## Sounds as clues

Stratton points to sound changes occurring in the German language that didn't happen in other Germanic languages such as English.

The 'th' sound at the beginning of words in English became a 'd' in German. This explains differences such as English 'thing' and German Ding, English 'thistle' and German Dissel, English 'that' and German das. If you know about this sound change, in theory,

you should be able to predict the meaning of German words such as Dorn even if you have never encountered it before. The 'd' was originally a 'th', so, in English it is 'thorn'. All you need to do is 'undo' the sound change," says Stratton.

In addition, Stratton notes that the comparative method is a way to reconstruct languages and show relationships between them. "Because of the comparative method, linguists and philologists have been able to show that many languages spoken today in Europe and parts of Asia, particularly India, trace back to a common ancestor known as Indo-European," he explains.

"For instance, all the words for 'foot' in Indo-European languages start with the 'p' sound – pie in Spanish, pied in French – except in Germanic languages – 'foot' in English, Fuß in German. The original 'p' sound shifted to an 'f' sound in Germanic languages, but not in the non-Germanic Indo-European languages.

"You can do this test for a few thousand other words, such as 'father' and you find same this systematic pattern. If you are a speaker of one of these Indo-European languages, and you are learning another Indo-European language, knowing these types



▲ James Stratton.

of changes can give learners an advantage because you can draw upon your previously existing knowledge," he says.

## Benefits of language history

There were several benefits Stratton identifies that allowed learners who undergo historical training to outperform learners in the non-historical group. "Words can change their meaning over time.

I could tell you to learn the German word sterben which means

'to die' and you can memorize that meaning or you can use it or hear it enough times and you may eventually acquire the meaning," he points out. "However, what I found is if you are told explicitly that the word is related to a word you already know, namely English 'starve', you can learn the meaning faster."

Secondly, students in the historical group were able to identify the meaning of significantly more cognates than the students in the non-historical group. Unlike learners in the traditional non-historical, they were also able to use their knowledge of sound change to anticipate the meaning of several words they had not learned about or encountered in their training sessions.

The comparative method and language history can provide second-language students with a deeper understanding of how languages are related.

"You can show to learners that the language you are learning is not as 'foreign' as you may think," concludes Stratton.

For more information visit: <https://news.ubc.ca/2022/12/20/looking-for-a-faster-way-to-learn-a-language-try-historical-linguistics/>

## ► "Accents" from page 1

tioner or brain injury – these people really wanted to be there, and were really grateful for the service.

Over the years since starting her private practice, Duke has seen a shift in the type of people seeking the service.

"In the 80s, we were seeing people from China and Korea," she recalls. "There were many people whose background language was Cantonese. Now, most of the people who come from a Chinese language background are Mandarin speaking."

"More recently the percentage of Asians in our program has decreased. We have been seeing an increase in Brazilians, which is a relatively new phenomenon."

According to Duke, the people who typically seek the services of the clinic are in their late 20s to early 30s. Around 60 per cent of people are looking to make a career advancement. Whether it's people who

are about to graduate from university and have job interviews, or professionals who really understand the importance of communication in the workplace.



▲ Isaku Kawamura.

"We even had a really puzzling French Canadian who wanted to work on her accent. So it's not just for individuals who are new to Canada," reflects Duke.

The team at the clinic supports participants by helping to identify the pacing of English. For example, where a person might not be pausing, in a place where native speakers of English would be expecting to hear a pause.

"We will not 'get rid' of someone's accent," she reinforces.

By focusing on intonation patterns, which are also very



▲ Wendy Duke.

important. The rise and fall of the voice across a sentence carries a lot of meaning in English that is not present in other languages in the same way. The process really tries to help individuals understand what they can do to make it easier for listeners to understand them.

Duke goes on to say that if someone is going to be discriminated against for being from Brazil or India or China, they will still suffer that discrimination because they will still have an accent.

## More research is needed

Ultimately the decision whether a person would like to embark on an accent modification program should be entirely their own, and success is always greater when participation is self motivated.

Employers can suggest or recommend the services. However, it needs to be done in a sensitive way, reducing the

chance of the suggestion being perceived as disrespectful.

"More work needs to be done to objectively compare if some accents are more tolerated, or perceived more positively – as well as comparing accents based on ethnicity," says Kawamura, who is now embarking in a masters program at McGill.

Kawamura points out that even though participants experience negative issues, Canada is still perceived as a fair country and people are satisfied with their new life here.

For more information visit:

<https://sociology.ubc.ca/news/isaku-kawamura-examines-the-role-of-accent-as-a-marker-of-foreignness-in-the-labour-market-examining-its-intersection-with-race-class-and-gender>

<https://columbiaspeech.com/our-team/wendy-duke-bio>

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