New evidence is presented that modifies Eric Lenneberg's proposed critical period of language acquisition. The development of lateralization is complete much earlier than puberty and is thus not a barrier to accent-free second-language learning by adults. Rather, the development of lateralization may correspond to normal first-language acquisition. Also, the case of Genie, a girl who endured 11 years of enforced isolation, shows that some first-language acquisition is possible after age five. Lenneberg's hypothesis was incorrect; I was only interested, simply to be thorough. I did not suspect that the involvement of the right hemisphere in children older than five are similar to the effects of right-brain damage in adults—and indicated that the involvement of the right hemisphere in older children is the same as during adulthood and strongly suggested that the development of cerebral dominance was accomplished by age five.

I never even began the dichotic listening experiment. Instead, I examined dichotic listening data produced in other studies. Using a scoring technique developed by my colleague, Richard Harshman, which allowed us to measure degree of lateralization unbiased by accuracy variations, we came to the exciting conclusion that no change in degree of lateralization was present after age five. Richard and I then began to think about what "lateralization-by-five" might mean; we speculated that it correlated with the growth of the mental abilities underlying language, rather than with the loss of the ability to acquire language.

The paper also contains a brief discussion of Genie, a child who began first-language acquisition as an adolescent. I remained in lateralization research for only a few more years, writing just a few more papers on this topic. My 1975 paper summarizes the evidence for lateralization-by-five, presents Harshman's ideas for reconciling our data with research suggesting that the infant is "born lateralized," and includes my attempt to come to terms with data gathered since 1973 apparently supporting lateralization-by-puberty.

The 1973 paper had immediate impact on the field of second-language acquisition. Scholars now looked for other explanations for child-adult differences in second-language acquisition and no longer assumed that a biological barrier existed for the adult second-language acquirer.

My work since 1975 has been in the field of language acquisition, and I have developed a general theory that is consistent with the 1973 lateralization results. The central hypothesis of the theory is the claim that both children and adults acquire language in the same way, by understanding messages (comprehensible input). The language acquisition device does not disintegrate at puberty, nor is it damaged. The child's superiority in ultimate attainment in second-language acquisition is due to the fact that the adult has a strong "effective filter" (a device suggested by Dulay and Burt), a mental block that keeps input from reaching the language acquisition device.

The cited paper had a major effect on my personal research style—I learned that the library can, at times, be more effective than the laboratory.


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