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The Retrieval of Lost Language Abilities Using Hypnotic Age Regression

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Those of us who have spent countless hours and even years trying to master other languages have felt that sinking feeling of frustration as we begin to lose our hard-earned abilities either through disuse or lack of opportunity to use our language skills. The problem of language attrition has long intrigued me and has led to the present project which asks the question, "Can lost language abilities be retrieved using hypnotic age-regression techniques?" This was a pilot study to see if further research was warranted.

Hypnosis and age regression

Neither of these two phenomena is without controversy. First of all, no one really knows what hypnosis is. The best definition I've received to date is from a class on hypnosis. The instructor defines hypnosis as, "The bypassing of the critical faculty (the conscious) and the establishment of selective or discriminative thinking." I feel that the key here is bypassing the critical faculty which helps to remove fear. This is only a surmation on my part, but I feel further research will bear this out.

The subject of age regression has also been very controversial. While I have not yet been able to review all the literature on the subject, it is safe to say that the core of the controversy is - "Is hypnotic age regression real or is it merely role playing?" Reiff and Scheerer say:

one of the most interesting and controversial phenomena of memory in hypnosis is the apparent "regression" of the subject to an earlier age upon command. The subject appears to exhibit some behavior patterns consistent with that particular age period. Whether the subject is actually regressed to a previous age or is acting out an adult concept of what he was like at that earlier age is the core of the controversy. (p. 62)

There are also those who feel there are several types of age regression. Erickson and Kubie (1941) suggest there might be two kinds of regression.

There can be a "regression" in terms of what the subject as an adult believes, understands, remembers, or imagines about that earlier period of life. In this form of regression, the subject's behavior will be a half-conscious dramatization of his present understanding of that previous time, and in which he will behave as he believes would be suitable for him as a child at the suggested age level. The other type of regression is far different in character and significance. It requires an actual revivification of the patterns of behavior of the suggested earlier period of life in terms of what actually belongs there. It is not a regression through the use of current memories, recollections, or reconstruc-
tions of a bygone day. The present itself and all subsequent life and experience are as though they were blotted out. (p. 592)

Weitzenhoffer (1953) suggests three types of regression: (I) Those times when the adult is simply acting out his own opinion of how a child would behave at the time; (II) denotes a true 'psychophysiological' return to a past state; (III) is a combination of parts I and II.

LeCron (1971) believes there are two distinct types of age regression. The first is a real regression to a past event which is then relived. This type requires a very deep trance state. The second is more of a surface type regression that doesn't require as deep a trance state. Results are easier to obtain from this latter type of regression. (p. 20)

I feel that what age regression under hypnosis boils down to is merely whether or not you are willing to accept or believe in its validity or not.

Research to date using hypnotic age regression to recover lost language ability

The research to date indicates that lost language abilities can be retrieved through the use of hypnosis. Reiff and Scheerer (1959) used hypnosis and age regression on a 26-year-old woman who had once done very well in Latin and had even won several awards for her translation abilities. The subject was asked to see how much of her Latin skills were still intact. She still had fragmented use of Latin but when asked to conjugate the verb esse, and decline Gallia, she failed. Placed under hypnosis and age regressed to her college days the subject did each of these tasks accurately and even translated a passage from the Gallic Wars. When returned to her normal state she was asked again to perform the tasks, but could not. The experimentors concluded:

In reviewing this record it becomes obvious that her ability to translate Latin to English was impressively greater (under hypnotic age regression) than during pre- and post-hypnotic waking states. (p. 203)

Orne (1951) age regressed a 26-year-old male to the age of six. This man had spoken German until his teens when he moved to America. When age regressed he did not automatically revert to his mother tongue of German. When asked what his mother said on his sixth birthday about his present he replied in English, "Do you like your present?" It was suggested his mother had really said, "Has du dein Geschenk gern?" The subject looked confused for a few moments and then responded in German from that point on. Once he began speaking German, he made no claim to understand English, but understood all questions asked him in English. He still only responded in German.

Fromm (1970) was surprised to find when age regressing a 26-year-old Japanese American to the age of three he spoke in Japanese. When taken out of hypnosis and asked if he knew any Japanese he firmly said he did not. Campbell and Schumman (1979) played Fromm's tape recording of these sessions for a native speaker of Japanese without telling him the subject
was under hypnosis. He says:

... he seems to be an adult around twenty to thirty years of age. At least it can be said that he is not a child, as the quality of his voice is that of an adult ... Probably, he suffered from aphasia and he is gradually overcoming it. It seems to me that he is trying hard to remember some Japanese in such a way as a mentally retarded child speaks. Sometimes his utterances are incomplete and incorrect. He speaks in a sing-song manner as if he were acting on a drama stage. In his utterance, for example, bokuno inu-yo-yo is usually used by little children from 3-10 years of age. On the other hand, desu in his utterance hontoni ii desu, is naturally used by adults. However, generally speaking, his utterances are very childish, they are those three to five year old children use. (p. 87)

The subject himself said of the experience when encouraged to remember it:

It was like my lips all of a sudden would move into these funny shapes. And then I would want to say something and wouldn't know what I was really saying. The words just came out and I wasn't sure whether they were real or not. The strangest thing is that my muscles without my volition would just take over. It was really like my mind wasn't involved in it. (Fromm, p. 83)

As (1961) had an 18-year-old male born in Helsinki and whose parents spoke Swedish in the home. When he was five years old he moved to America with his mother. From six years old onward, he spoke only English and declared he had forgotten Swedish altogether. Before using hypnosis, As tested the subject's knowledge of Swedish. The subject was then tested under hypnosis. The subject was found able to respond to certain questions, count to ten, and name certain objects in Swedish that he was unable to do in the normal state. The conclusion by As was that, "... a clear improvement in Swedish language took place during the hypnotic regression, but the change taken as a whole, was not particularly dramatic." (p. 28)

Campbell (1978) tried to replicate the previous studies by age regressing a 28-year-old Japanese woman to ages of five and younger. Campbell's experiment failed to produce results. He concludes:

We are very interested in the negative results obtained from these attempts to revivify the Japanese language competence of the S when all of our criteria seem to have been met. It is possible that potential for language retrieval has a strong correlation with a S's degree of suggestibility. Although capable of age regression, the S scored only eight points on the Stanford Scale, which suggests that she is only a moderately good hypnotic subject. (p. 92)

It becomes all too evident that there is a great lack of empirical research to support using hypnosis as a research tool in language study. Much more work and data collection are needed.
Problems with research to date

A close examination of the above studies reveals similarities common to all:

1. All subjects except Reiff and Scheerer's spoke a mother tongue other than English the first years of their lives and over the course of time seemed to forget all knowledge of ever having spoken a foreign language.

2. All of the studies showed success in the retrieval of lost language abilities under the influence of hypnosis except Campbell, who was trying to reduplicate the former studies.

3. All subjects were age regressed to childhood ages of between 3 and 7 years of age except Reiff and Scheerer's, who was regressed to college age.

Campbell's study led him to the conclusion that the subjects must be willing to subject themselves to hypnosis and that the subjects must score on the upper extremes of hypnosis suggestibility scales. He believes very strongly that the reason he has failed to reproduce the former studies is that his subjects have all fallen into the 'average' category of hypnotizability, while Fromm's subject was extremely high, a 12, on the scale of hypnotic suggestibility.

Research and interviews with several hypnotherapists and psychologists has led me to believe that anyone rating a 12 on the susceptibility scales is very rare indeed. This fact alone, coupled with the rarity of finding subjects that spoke a foreign language while young and are now adults, would seem to be looking for the proverbial 'needle in a haystack.'

This has led me to ask where the present research is going. Has it boxed itself in? What good are the present methods for those of only average hypnotizability and who didn't learn a second language until their teens or later? It seemed that unless a wider use could be made of hypnotic retrieval techniques this type of research would be of no use in a study of language attrition.

Method

Reiff and Scheerer (1959) report that depth of trance will affect any results obtained under hypnosis. It is accepted that to reach the age regression levels attained in the previous studies, a very deep trance is needed. In this pilot study I postulated that if a person learned a language in his teens or older, then a deep trance state would not be needed. A light trance would do as well. Since most people can obtain a light trance state, I also postulated that a subject be of only average hypnotizability. I searched for a subject who could meet the following criteria:

1. Had a real desire to recover lost language abilities.
2. Had learned his language in his teens or later.
3. Didn't have any qualms about being hypnotized.
4. Was of only average or less hypnotizability.

The S chosen met all of the aforementioned criteria. The S was male and had just turned 53 years of age as we began the project. The language that had been learned was Finnish and had been learned in the later teens and early twenties. The S's Finnish had been used on a daily basis for purposes of teaching and social interaction over a two-year period. The subject had been a missionary and had taken particular pride in his ability to tell the Joseph Smith story in Finnish. The subject had not done this in thirty years. Could the subject retell the Joseph Smith story better from conscious memory, or better under hypnosis?

Prior to the hypnosis the subject was asked to tape himself telling the Joseph Smith story without previous practice or rehearsal. This was done to provide us with some standard of his present abilities in Finnish.

It should be noted here that eight sessions were planned, but only three were realized due to circumstances beyond our control.

**First hypnosis**

The first session was used primarily to allow the S and hypnotist to get acquainted. The subject was questioned about his reactions and feelings toward hypnotism. We received a very positive response. The subject was placed in a very light trance and asked to perform several mental tasks. This was done to test the S's ability to be hypnotized and his suggestibility.

The subject was placed under hypnosis again and then regressed to a time when he was very happy at the age of 19. The subject was allowed to adapt to this change in time and to orient himself. At this juncture the subject was asked to speak. It was noted at this point that the S came up from a medium trance into a light trance and then almost entirely out of trance. S was given the suggestion that on subsequent sessions he would be more relaxed and be able to talk without coming out of trance. The first session was then ended.

This first hypnosis revealed several important factors:

1. The subject was determined to be of average suggestibility by his performance on the tasks given him to do. This suited my purpose.
2. A fluctuation of trance state was observed when the subject tried to speak. I feared this might affect the results, but was assured the S could be conditioned to do it better over the course of time.
3. The results were highly influenced by anxiety and the newness of being hypnotized for the first time.
4. The subject seemed acutely aware of his failure and thought himself unsuitable as a subject. He was concerned I wouldn't be able to get results from him for my research. He was reassured at this point in time that it didn't matter whether I got positive results or negative results; both were significant.

Second hypnosis

Nearly two weeks passed in between sessions. The subject assured me that he hadn't practiced in the interim. The subject was considerably more at ease with the situation the second time. The S seemed very relaxed and calm. The S was again hypnotized and regressed. This time, instead of asking the S to speak, he was asked to see himself telling the Joseph Smith story, to visualize it as the best story he'd ever told in Finnish.

This second session began to encourage us:

1. The subject felt he might have attained a much deeper trance than previously. This might have been due to his being more relaxed and comfortable with the situation.
2. He felt he could have told the Joseph Smith story almost flawlessly if we had asked him to speak.
3. We felt progress was being made.

Third hypnosis

The subject appeared much more relaxed and confident about the situation in our third session. He was again regressed but asked to speak this time in telling the Joseph Smith story. Again the subject assured us he had made no conscious effort to rehearse the story in between sessions.

1. The S appeared as though he was really enjoying his rendition. This session was tape recorded.

The results

Due to my inability to speak Finnish I turned elsewhere to have my data analyzed. My sincerest thanks go to Dr. Melvin Luthy, Department Chairman of Linguistics, Brigham Young University. His are the remarks that follow. The letter B corresponds to the tape done without hypnosis and A to the tape done under hypnosis. Dr. Luthy has commented on four areas: (1) Pronunciation, (2) Vocabulary, (3) Grammar, and (4) Idiom. In each section errors are indicated by the use of an asterisk (*).

To read the actual transcript of the two versions in Finnish, they have been supplied, along with an English translation, in the appendix.
COMMENTS ON VERSIONS A AND B

Pronunciation

I can perceive no significant differences between the two versions. Minor errors occur in the length of final long vowels and in some instances of gradation in both versions, but these are typical of all English speakers who speak Finnish as a foreign language.

Vocabulary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Without Hypnosis</th>
<th>With Hypnosis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>B (*errors)</td>
<td>A (corresponding uses)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*bibliassa</td>
<td>roomatussa (correct)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*kysykoon</td>
<td>pyytää (correct) - but later *kysyen when it should be pyytäen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*valttamatta</td>
<td>soimaamatta (correct)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*pilikki</td>
<td>(doesn't use corresponding idea)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*kolkeutui</td>
<td>*kolkeutui (this appears in both versions)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*valta</td>
<td>mahti (more correct term)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*valteutti</td>
<td>(doesn't use corresponding idea)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*lahti(?)</td>
<td>(doesn't use corresponding idea)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Version B has at least seven, possibly eight, incorrect vocabulary items. Version A has only one clearly incorrect vocabulary item. There is one use of an incorrect word for bible in Version B. It is bibliassa, but later in the version the correct word is used. In Version A the correct word for bible is used throughout. The second vocabulary item used incorrectly is kysykoon. The more correct term is used in Version A. It is pyytää. The incorrect kysykoon means ask but it means more to question. The intent here should be to request rather than to ask a question. In Version A the correct verb is used in this connection, but later on another form of the verb to question is used when the verb to request should have been used. Thus, the verb to question is used in both versions incorrectly when the intent was to request.

In Version B the speaker uses a word valttamatta in quoting a scripture. That is not a correct Finnish verb. The correct verb and verb form is used in Version A. It is soimaamatta. In Version B, a word pilikki is used. Again, this is an incorrect term which possibly resulted from an intent to say pisti. Version A does not discuss a corresponding idea. In Version B the speaker uses a verb kolkeutui, which is nonexistent in Finnish. Curiously, he also uses the same verb in Version A. The intended verb here was polivistua. I can only guess that there was confusion in the mind of the speaker with perhaps two other verbs; polveutua, which means to be descended from, and is clearly related to polivistua; and kolkuttaa, which means to knock. The verb that the speaker used in both versions seems to be a blend of these two verbs. In Version B the speaker uses the term valta which does mean power, but it means it more in a political sense. In Version A he chooses a more correct term, mahti, which refers more to force or power. This is a more correct term.
In Version A, he uses a term valteutti, which again is a nonexistent Finnish verb. He does not use the corresponding idea which would cause him to select that same verb in Version B. In Version B he uses the expression lahti hanet which means literally left him, but the verb left in this case is an intransitive verb requiring a case ending on the pronoun which would mean left from him. If the speaker intended to mean that he left him, meaning something like left him alone, then the verb would have been jatti, in which case the pronoun would be in the appropriate form. Thus, this case could be considered either an error in vocabulary choice or in grammar, depending on the intent of the speaker.

**Grammar**

**Without hypnosis**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>B</th>
<th>With Hypnosis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>*sydansa</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*pyytamaan (obj. was lacking)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*huuti</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*lahti hanet (?)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*tuntui itsensa</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*rakastama poika</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In Version B there are at least five, possibly six, errors in grammar. The word sydansa is not declined into its appropriate form. The verb pyytamaan lacks an overt object which is necessary in Finnish. The verb huuti is an incorrect past tense form of the verb. The expression lahti hanet has been discussed under vocabulary above. The expression tuntui itsensa is incorrect because the verb is an intransitive verb followed by an inappropriate object. The form rakastama poika is incorrectly formed.

**Idiom**

**Without Hypnosis**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>B (*errors)</th>
<th>With Hypnosis A (corresponding uses)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>*oikeassa (two occurrences)</td>
<td>oikea (correct)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*paansa ylle (arch.)</td>
<td>*hanen edelleen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*han tuntui hyualta (doesn't use corresponding idea)</td>
<td>*yksi puhui</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*yksi puhui (doesn't use corresponding idea)</td>
<td>*siina</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(doesn't use corresponding idea)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The speaker makes errors in idiomatic usage in both versions. One idiom used incorrectly in Version B is used correctly in Version A. That one is oikea. Another idiom used incorrectly in Version B is also used incorrectly in Version A. That idiom is yksi puhui. It simply means one spoke, but in Finnish you must say the other spoke.

In both versions he approaches the idea of something coming over his head.
and the idiom is different in both cases, but wrong in both cases. In Version B the idiom is understandable but very archaic; and in Version A the form is correct, but the meaning is slightly incorrect. This may be classified as a vocabulary error. There are two other idioms of minor consequence in Version A which are used incorrectly. One is siina, meaning in it or therein. The correct form should be sielta, meaning from there. This possibly could be considered a grammar error. The other idiom could possibly be a slip of the tongue. It is jolla oli neljätoista. The intent here is to say he was 14 years of age, but it turns out to say who had 14 years. It may be a slip of the tongue.

Overall impressions

In both versions, the speaker hesitates frequently to search for the next expression. Version A shows more grammatical complexity and accuracy and broader and more skillful use of the vocabulary. Version A is rhetorically more sophisticated, and sentences are much better developed.

Conclusions

While this has been only a pilot study, I am very encouraged by the results obtained thus far. From the outset I was concerned that hypnosis could not be used with the average L2 learner because of the scarcity of people who are able to attain very high scores on the hypnotic suggestibility tests. This study shows that a light trance is sufficient if the subject is not being regressed to early childhood and that there is an improvement in language ability of those determined to be of only average hypnotizability. While I cannot say this with absolute certainty because this is only one subject, I feel very encouraged that further experimentation and research will prove me correct.

Where is the present research headed? It has certainly raised more questions than it has answered. It is hoped that this might become a viable and useful tool for those studying language attrition. It might also be of use in not only unconscious retrieval of language, but conscious retrieval and re-use of the speaker's language abilities. Only further research will be able to tell.

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TAPE B Translation

Joseph Smith lived in America ..a hundred.. he was born in America a hundred and thirty years ago...a hundred sixty years ago. When he was a young boy, he read in the Bible a certain scripture (verse) where it says that if someone lacks wisdom let him question of God who gives to all liberally and (inappropriate term here). This Bible verse (wrong term here) his heart so that he thought that if I could know which church is right I had better go pray..I should go ask God which church.. which church is right. It was April, one day in the morning he went to pray. He went to ask God which church was right..which church was in the right. He went (English phrase: into a forest) and there he (inappropriate term here) down and prayed to God. When he was praying, a great..great power (used an inappropriate term for power) came and (inappropriate term here) him and he could not pray. He could not even speak. In his heart he cried out to God and soon a pillar of light came over his head. When he saw the pillar of light, that bad (evil) power (again wrong term) left him and he felt good..he felt himself in peace. In the pillar of light were two persons. One spoke to him saying Joseph this is my son.. my beloved son.. hear him. After that, that boy, that youth asked Jesus Christ which church was right... (Speaker stops here)

TAPE A Translation

When I left on a mission I did not know at that time how to tell you why I went on a mission, and now I would like to tell you of a certain young boy by the name of Joseph Smith who years ago wanted to know which church was right. He read from the Bible..read the Bible and therein he found
a certain verse where it says that if any of you lack wisdom
he can ask of God who gives to all liberally and abraideth not.
He could receive wisdom..he could know what is right, what is true.
And then this youth Joseph Smith who was fourteen years old..he wanted
to know which church was right and after he had read this verse
in the Bible he knew that he could ask wisdom of God..about this matter.
Okay, the following day in the morning he went into the forest and
there (inappropriate term) and began to ask wisdom from God, he began
to pray to God, asking requesting wisdom from him. Just as he
was about to (beginning to) pray, he...there was a great power that
did not let him pray, but he was finally able to pray, able
to ask, able to question, able to cry out to God, and he saw
a pillar of light which came before him and therein were two persons.
One spoke saying this is my beloved son, hear him. This youth Joseph
Smith asked which church is right and the Son of God, Jesus Christ
spoke to him saying that that church was not on the earth.
It had been a long time ago but it was no more, but we will come
to restore the Church to the earth. Afterwards, Joseph Smith returned
home and knew that the true church was not on the earth, that God soon
would come to restore it. I testify to you Mrs. Niemi that this church
is now on earth. It is the true church of Jesus Christ and its name
is the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.