

## Starting Over – The Language Development in Internationally-Adopted Children

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Internationally-adopted children are a unique population of language learners. They discontinue acquisition of their birth language when they are adopted by families that speak other languages. Their unique language learning history raises important practical, clinical and theoretical issues. Practically speaking: what is the typical language learning trajectory of these children after adoption and what factors affect their language learning: age at adoption, country of origin, quality and nature of the pre-adoption learning environment, and others. They also raise important theoretical questions: How resilient is their socio-emotional, cognitive and language development following adoption? Does their language development resemble that of first or second language learners, or something else? Do they experience total attrition of their birth language? Are there neuro-cognitive traces of the birth language after adoption and what neuro-cognitive processes underlie acquisition and processing of the adopted language; are they the same as those of monolingual native speakers or those of early second language learners? And, how do we interpret differences, if any, between adopted and non-adoptive children? Chapters in this volume by leading researchers review research and provide insights on these issues.

I bambini adottati internazionalmente sono una popolazione unica di studenti di lingue. Interrompono l'acquisizione della loro lingua di origine al momento dell'adozione da parte di famiglie che parlano altre lingue. La loro peculiare storia di apprendimento linguistico solleva importanti interrogativi dal punto di vista pratico, clinico e teorico. Ossia: qual è il percorso tipico di apprendimento linguistico in questi bambini dopo l'adozione e quali fattori influenzano il loro apprendimento linguistico: età al momento dell'adozione, paese di origine, qualità e natura dell'ambiente di apprendimento durante il periodo pre-adozione, e altri. Essi ci portano a porci altri interrogativi teorici importanti: quanto è resiliente il loro sviluppo socio-emotivo, cognitivo e linguistico dopo l'adozione? Il loro sviluppo linguistico assomiglia quello degli studenti di L1, di L2 o altro? Si verifica in loro un attrito totale della loro lingua di origine? Ci sono tracce neuro-cognitive del linguaggio di origine dopo l'adozione e quali processi neuro-cognitivi sono alla base dell'acquisizione e dell'elaborazione della lingua del paese di adozione; sono uguali a quelli dei madrelingua monolingui o di studenti L2? Come interpretiamo le eventuali differenze tra bambini adottivi e non adottivi? I capitoli di questo volume scritti da noti ricercatori esaminano gli studi disponibili e forniscono approfondimenti su questi temi.

# CONTENUTI

## Introduction

Fred Genesee

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## Part I. General development

### Chapter 1. Pre-adoption stress, adversity and later development in IA children

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In this chapter, we first review the research on internationally adopted (IA) children's experiences with birth families. Then we focus on literature related to institutional care and its impact on young children's development, as well as the impact of pre-adoption adversity on IA children's post-adoption development. We aim to highlight the challenges facing adoption research in linking pre-adoption adversities with post-adoption outcomes. We emphasize that the challenges are mainly due to two methodological barriers: challenges in prospectively identifying and studying children who will be abandoned, institutionalized, and later adopted, and the lack of standardized post-adoption measures that can be used among IA children from different countries. Notwithstanding such limitations, findings point to the links between prolonged and severe pre-adoption deprivation and neurobiological impairments, post-adoption cognitive delays, attention problems, and learning disabilities. Finally, we emphasize that despite pre-adoption adversity, IA children demonstrate considerable resilience in recovery and developmental catch-up.

### Chapter 2. Children's cognitive development after adoption

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This chapter provides an overview of research on the cognitive development of adopted children, focusing on IQ scores, school achievement and executive functioning. Because of the deprivation many adoptees experience prior to adoption, it might be expected that their cognitive development is at higher risk compared to non-adopted children. However, the question arises whether children who experience a more nurturing and more stimulating environment after early deprivation show a catch-up in development. In this chapter, research on three different types of 'atypical' rearing conditions is discussed, that is institutional care, foster care and adoptive families. We first present the results of longitudinal studies, or 'natural'

experiments, in which the development of internationally adopted children is studied over several years. Second, we discuss outcomes of an experimental study (the Bucharest Early Intervention Project), that studied the effects of placement in foster care on children's development. Finally, a series of meta-analyses (comparing adoptees with their environmental peers and with peers who were left behind) is presented in which the effects of adoption on cognitive development are examined. In sum, the studies reported in this chapter provide support for the notion that adoption is a positive intervention fostering the cognitive development of adoptees.

## **Part II. Language development**

### **Chapter 3. Language development during the preschool years**

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This chapter focuses on the speech and language development of the first years post-adoption, of children adopted internationally as infants, toddlers, and preschoolers. The attrition or loss of their birth language, the pattern of acquisition of the new home language, and the rate of learning the new language are discussed in terms of their theoretical and clinical interest. The chapter focuses on what is known about the language acquisition of the children across the components of language; pragmatics, phonology, semantics, and morpho-syntax. A table provides a summary of existing studies and the specific measures used within each study as a function of the components of language.

### **Chapter 4. Language, cognitive, and academic abilities of school-age internationally-adopted children**

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Although internationally-adopted (IA) children generally display signs of successful adaptation and developmental resilience at older ages, other studies have found that a larger than expected subgroup of IA children experience some weaknesses in language during the school years (Scott, Roberts, & Glennen, 2011). Studies that have compared the abilities of school-aged IA children to those of non-adopted monolingual children matched on important variables have found that the IA children experience long-term language weaknesses (Delcenserie, Genesee & Gauthier, 2013). The main goal of the present chapter is to offer a review of school-age IA children's language development; however, additional aspects of their development are considered, including memory, executive functions, and academic achievement. These areas are related to language development and make it possible to provide a broader picture of adoptees' overall development.

### **Chapter 5. Long-term language development in international adoptees**

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The linguistic development of internationally adopted children has been studied extensively for several decades. Whereas this research has mainly concerned toddlers and pre-school children during their first years after adoption, school-age children, and adolescents, there is currently scarce empirical evidence on the long-term linguistic development in adults with adoption

background. While studies of infants and pre-school children generally show fast and positive short-term progress in linguistic development, medium-term studies (4–10 years after adoption) describe adoptees as still “lagging behind” their non-adopted peers. This chapter reviews the studies to date on long-term outcomes in the linguistic development of adoptees. What happens after more than ten years of exposure and into adulthood? From the review, we conclude that slight differences between adopted and non-adopted L1 speakers of a language often remain into adulthood. In addition, the limited evidence that exists to date suggests that adults who at a young age emigrated with their families to the L2 environment, and therefore continued to develop their L1, exhibit similar levels of L2 proficiency as internationally adopted adults. However, more research is required to further substantiate and generalize the conclusions that are made on the basis of our review.

## **Chapter 6. Speech and language clinical issues in internationally-adopted children**

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Most IA children *catch-up* and rapidly learn their new language but others lag behind and need additional support to improve their speech or language abilities. During the first few years after adoption, professionals need to adapt their assessment procedures in order to determine which children are developing language or speech more slowly than their IA peers. This chapter reviewed procedures for assessing IA children at different ages during the language transition period. Once the language transition ends, IA children can be evaluated using procedures similar to other children. This chapter also reviewed some of the language strengths and weaknesses that are observed in IA children during speech and language testing and issues regarding which *tests* or other normed criteria to use when evaluating test results. Most IA children are adopted into high SES homes and attend schools where ‘average’ is often above average. Although IA children may struggle academically in these schools, most do not have a speech or language disorder significant enough to qualify them for therapy services. Alternative ways to provide support to struggling learners in the classroom were reviewed.

## **Chapter 7. Language loss or retention in internationally-adopted children Neurocognitive implications for second language learning**

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It is well known that the most active period for brain development and acquisition of native language phonology occurs within the first year of life. For children who continue to speak their native language, early phonological representations may create the framework for the acquisition of more complex language abilities. However, internationally-adopted (IA) children discontinue their birth language when they begin to acquire their adopted language and, thus, exposure to and use of the language that gave rise to these native language representations is not maintained. In this chapter, we discuss neuro-cognitive evidence for the loss of elements of adoptees’ birth language. The implications of the fate of the birth language are considered in the context of typical developmental processes that occur during the earliest stages of language acquisition. In particular, we consider the impact of early experiences with the birth language on second language development and processing in adoptees and in language learners in general.