

Age and the Upper Limits of Attainment in Second and Heritage Languages

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The presentation begins by reviewing the nexus of biological, linguistic, and biographical variables that underlie age-related effects in the second language (L2). Then, with reference to post-adolescent L2 acquisition, I highlight brain-based and behavioral studies of the upper limits of attainment, which have revealed noteworthy approximations to monolingual standard. To connect these overviews to the heritage language context, I invoke a simple heuristic: By virtue of early and occasional exposure to the heritage language, the upper limits of heritage language (re-)attainment potentially exceed the upper limits of attainment in late L2 acquisition. Guided by this heuristic I examine, for second and heritage languages: proficiency/dominance in processing; (un-)attainability; bi-directional influence in language use; and the appropriateness of monolingual and early-bilingual yardsticks for establishing the upper limits of attainment. This exercise is intended to yield testable hypotheses that might figure in future heritage language research.