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Tuning in to a novel language is easier without orthography

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Abstract

Tuning into a novel language is a particularly difficult task for many adults. While the rhythmic and melodic patterns, i.e. prosody, bootstrap language acquisition in infancy, they are considerably challenging to learn in adulthood. Is it because of an age-related decline of the language-learning ability or because of unfavourable learning conditions? We investigated whether adults can auditorily sensitise to the prosody of a novel language, and whether such sensitisation is affected by concurrent presentation of alphabetic transcription. After 5 minutes of exposure to Māori, Czech listeners could reliably recognize this language in a post-test using low-pass filtered clips of Māori and Malay recorded by new speakers. Recognition accuracy was lower for participants exposed to the novel-language speech along with deep-orthography transcriptions or shallow orthography with unfamiliar characters. Adults can thus attune to novel-language prosody, but orthography hampers this ability. This has implications for language acquisition theories and learning practice.