

## **The earliest stages of second language acquisition and the adult capacity for learning**

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How do adults break into the continuous speech stream of an unknown language in the wild? Despite the work on the role of input in adult second language (L2) acquisition, the advances of artificial and statistical language learning studies, etc., surprisingly little is known about this crucial first step in adult L2 acquisition. The learning task minimally consists of three components: (1) isolating a relevant string in continuous speech, (2) identifying and mapping meaning onto it, and (3) generalising from known exemplars to novel items. In this talk I report on three experiments that examine what information adults can extract from audio-visual input in an unknown and typologically distant L2 after minimal exposure and without help. We test whether Dutch adults can recognise Mandarin Chinese words and extract lexical meaning after minimal exposure, and what role item frequency and gestural links between sound and meaning play for such initial input processing. We also investigate whether adults can generalise from encountered exemplars in the input to novel items after minimal exposure, and extract phonotactic information. While emphasising the complexity of the learning task, the results also suggest that the adult learning mechanism is more powerful than normally assumed when faced with small amounts of complex, continuous audio-visual language input.