

Are Some Languages, Like Chinese, Really Harder to Learn Than Others, Like English or French?

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Abstract

Objectively speaking, all modern spoken languages should be equally difficult (or easy) to learn, since all normal children learning their native languages do so at approximately the same rate and with the same competence, progressing from easy to more complex grammar and syntax in the same way. Why then, do some languages seem more difficult than others? Perhaps people are referring to the written language, where it may be true that mastering Chinese requires more time than English or French, but this is marginal, since Chinese children quickly catch up to their English and French peers in reading comprehension. Rather, the real differences in difficulty derive from two sources: 1) a learner's hardened L1 language habits trying to cope with contrasting L2 features, and 2) a learner's faulty language expectations due to unfamiliarity with unique L2 characteristics. This author claims that it is the latter (faulty expectations) which is the real culprit, and once overcome, will lead to effective language mastery. Examples from Chinese and other languages are presented.

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