Why We Struggle Learning Languages

There’s a myth when it comes to language. And that myth is that children are exceptionally good at learning languages and that we lose that gift when we grow up.

And we have good reason for believing in this myth. Many of us have had this experience. We’ve picked a language in high school or college, studied hard for three, four, five years, and then we take a trip to France, and we meet a five-year-old French child, and she speaks way better French than we do. It’s not fair. It’s not fair because you are comparing yourself to a child who has had 15,000 hours of French exposure, and you have had 100.

When you make the fair comparison - you take a five year old child, transplant them to Spain give them 500 hours of exposure there; adult gets a job in Spain, 500 hours of exposure - what you’ll find is that the adult beats the child every time. We are better at learning languages than children. That’s not to say there are no advantages to being a kid; there are three.

* Between the ages of six months and 12 months, in that tiny window, children can hear sounds and new languages in a way that we lose.
* Advantage two, children are fearless. They will walk into any conversation, whether they know the words or not, where we will hold ourselves back; we'll be afraid.

Neither of those two advantages outweighs our superior ability to learn. The third advantage of being a child is the advantage of time. We don’t have 15,000 hours to spend learning French.