

# ONCE A NATIVE, ALWAYS A NATIVE?

## First language attrition among multilingual migrants

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 languageattrition

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# TWO LANGUAGES, ONE BRAIN

- speakers who learn a second language (L2) are not expected to become 'perfect'
- a foreign accent, lexical and grammatical errors etc. are all considered natural
- native speakers who become proficient in an L2 do not expect the same thing to happen to their first language (L1)
- neither do their friends and families
- so the responses are often extremely negative

# ‘LOSING PART OF ONE’S SOUL’

“Mma Ramotswe had once come across somebody who had forgotten his Setswana, and she had been astonished, and shocked. This person had gone to live in Mozambique as a young man [...].

When he came back to Botswana, thirty years later, it seemed as if he were a foreigner [...]. To lose your own language was like forgetting your mother, and as sad, in a way. We must not lose Setswana, she thought, even if we speak a great deal of English these days, because that would be like losing part of one's soul.”

(Alexander McCall Smith. *The Full Cupboard of Life*)

## A DELIBERATE PLOY?

[Anne Boleyn recently returned to England age 20, having been brought up in France from childhood.]

“Now she speaks her native tongue with a slight, unplaceable accent, strewing her sentences with French words when she pretends she can’t think of the English.”  
(Hilary Mantel, *Wolf Hall*)

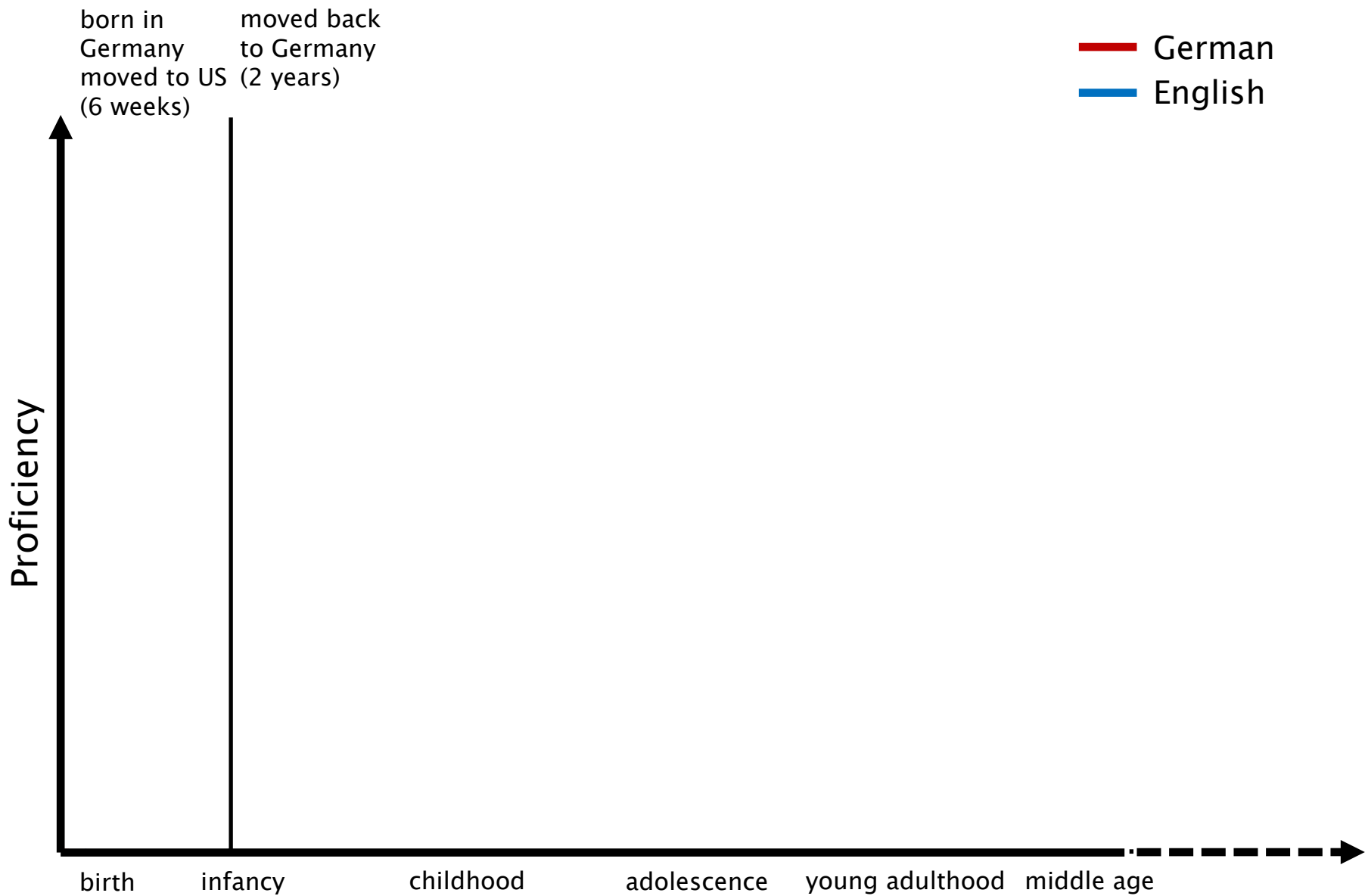
# CAN YOU FORGTET A LANGUAGE?

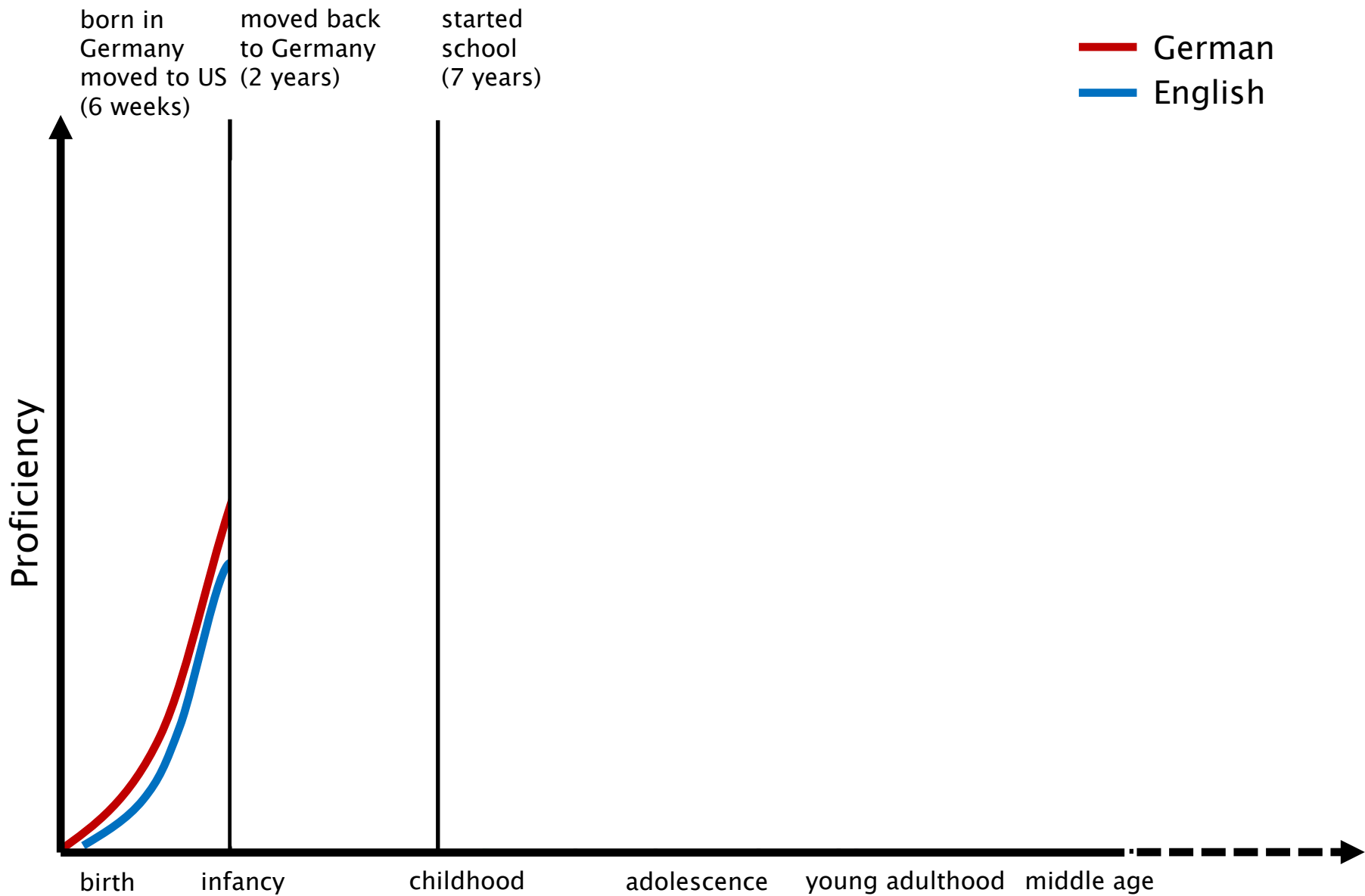
- what kinds of phenomena of language loss, language change, language mixing etc. do we see in native languages?
- what kinds of phenomena do we see in in foreign languages?
- how long does it take for these phenomena to develop?
- what factors play a role?
- an example

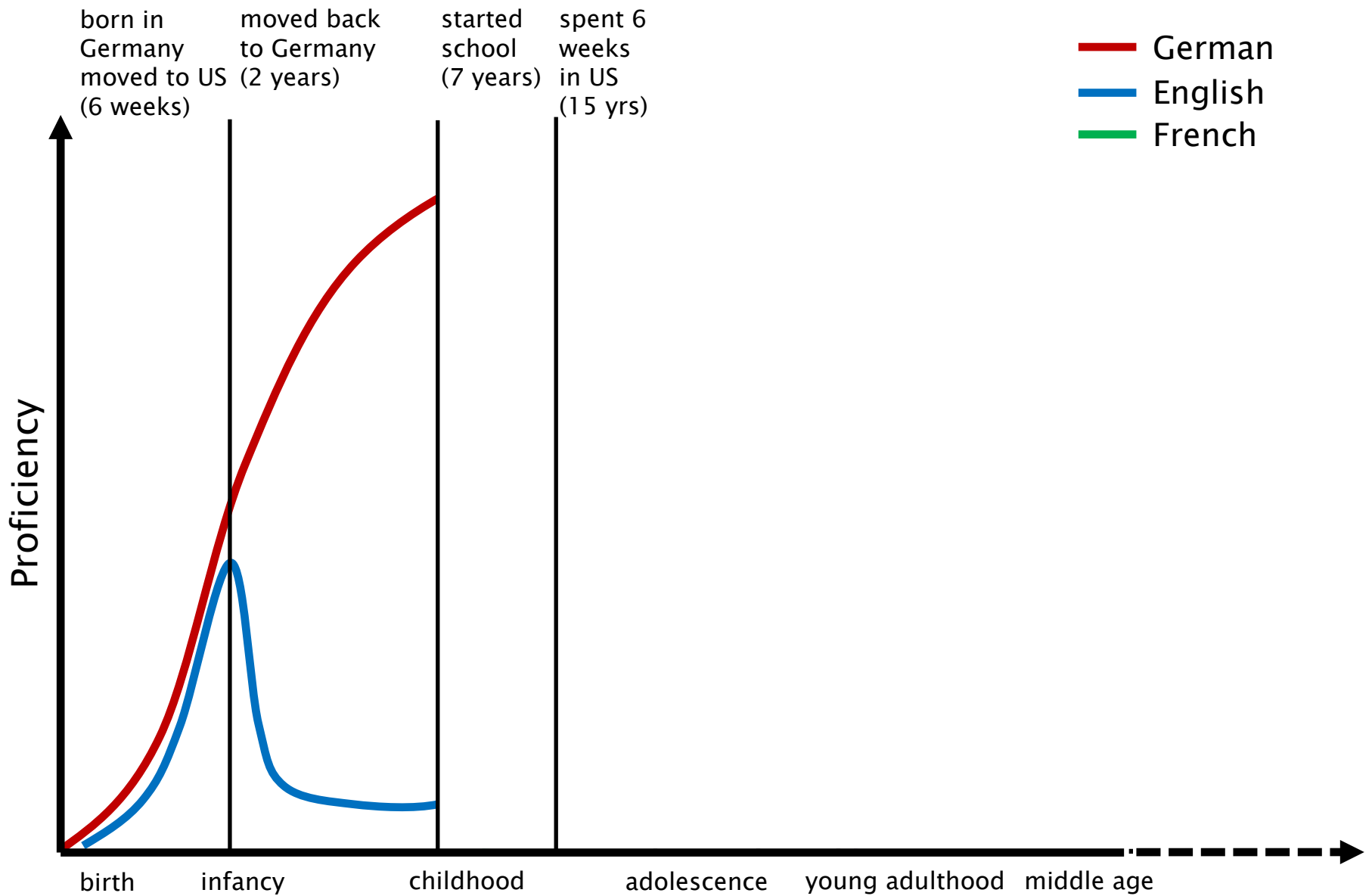


MERRY CHRISTMAS★HAPPY NEW YEAR

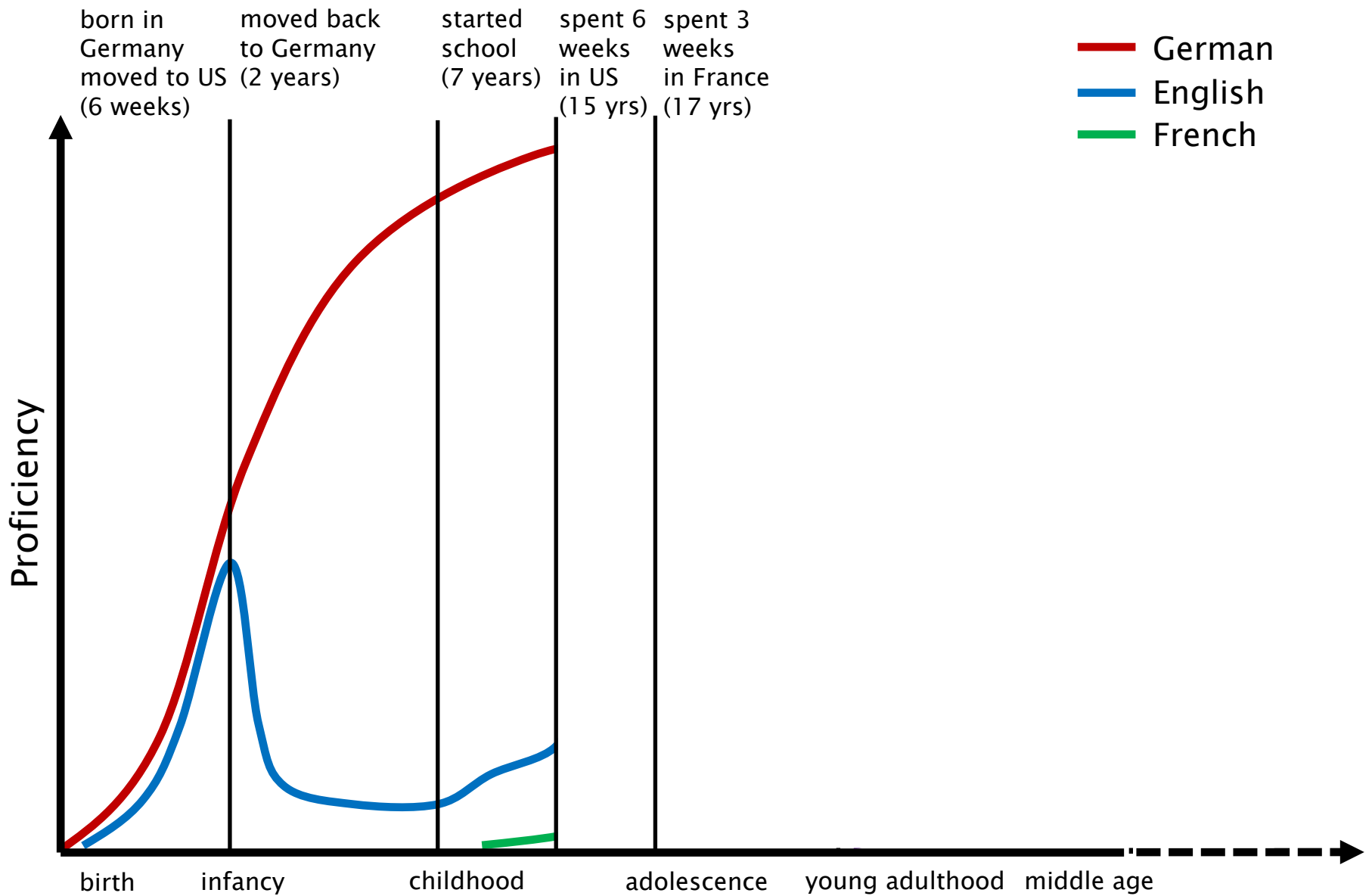


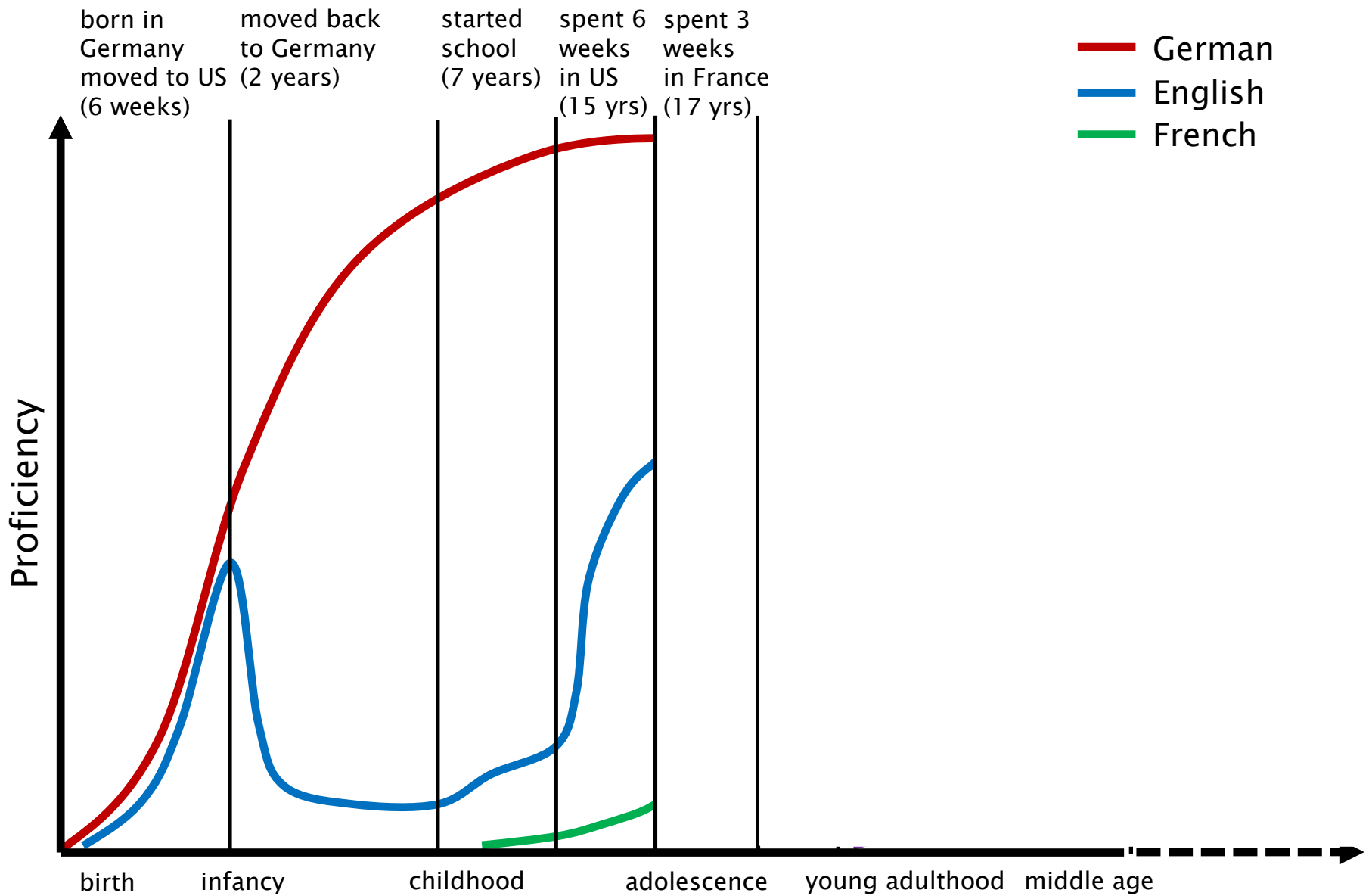


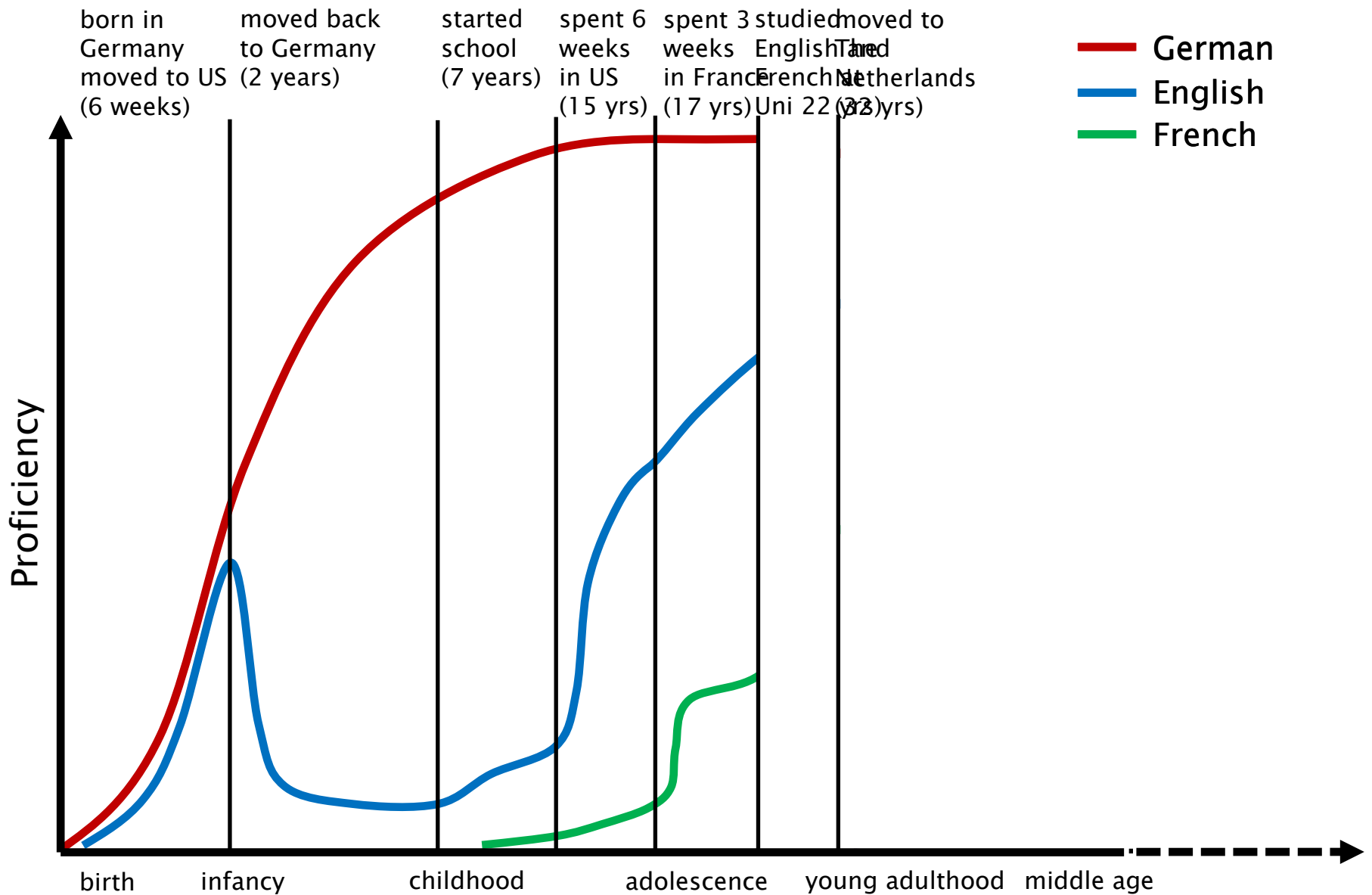


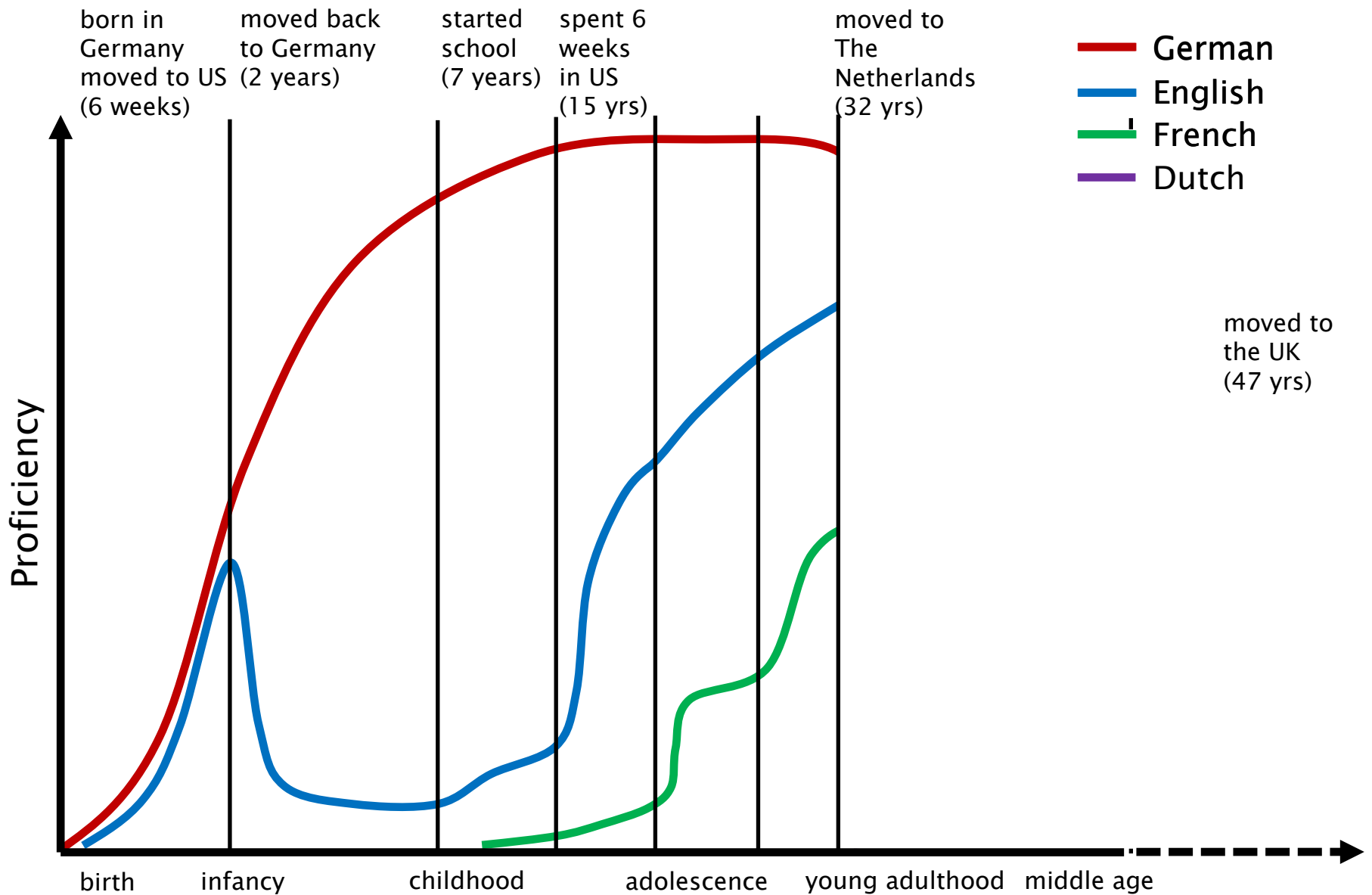


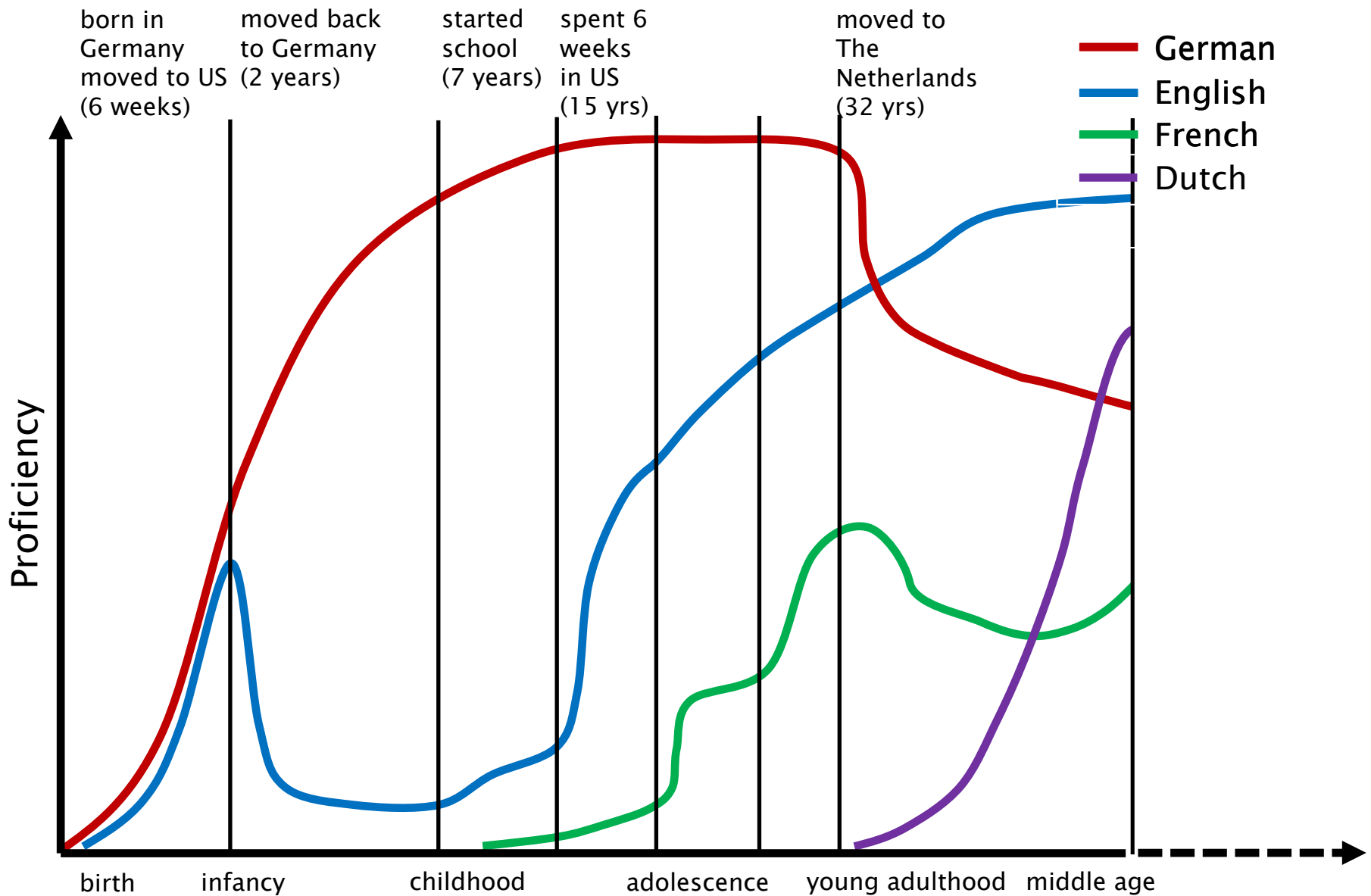


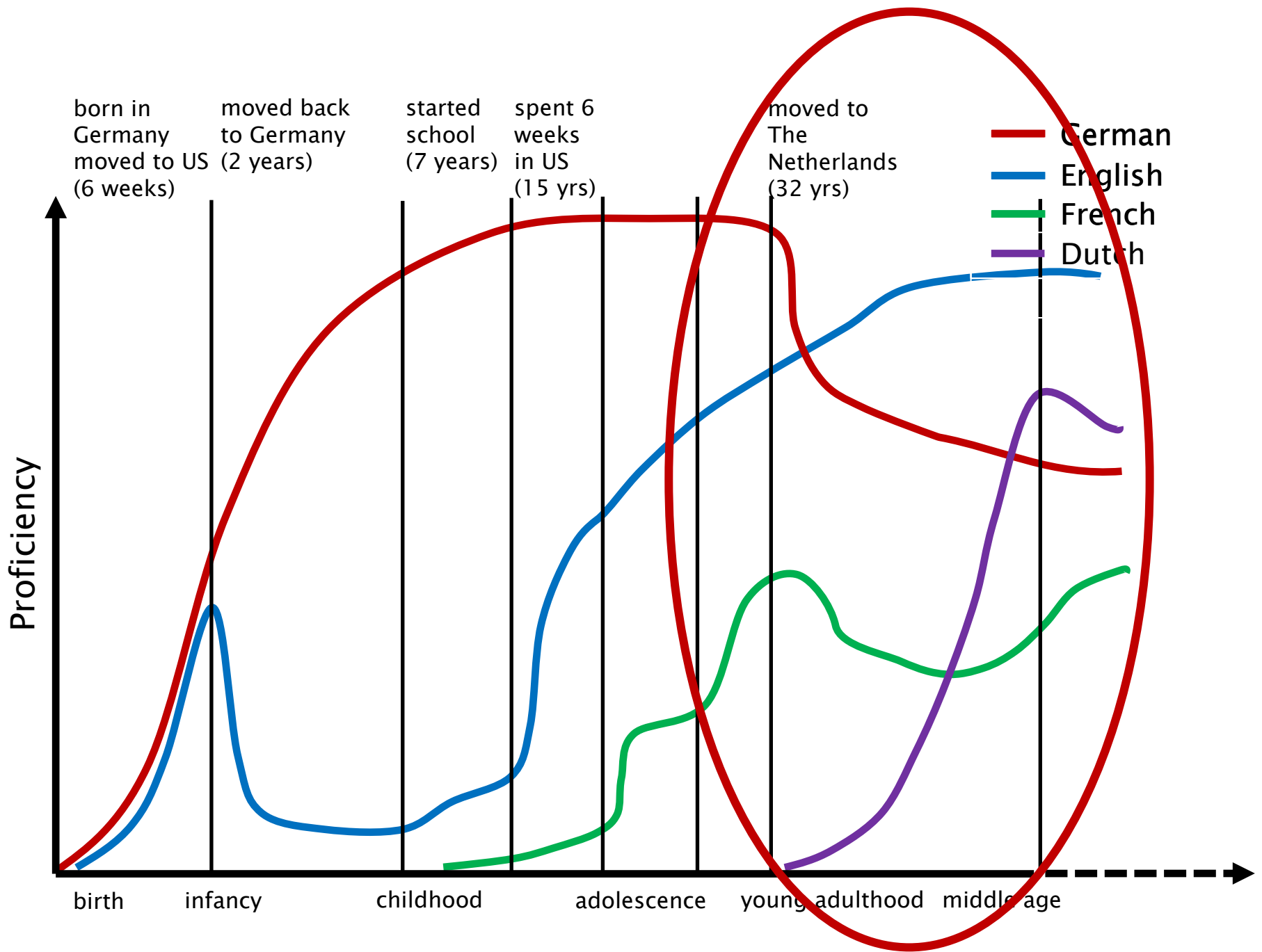




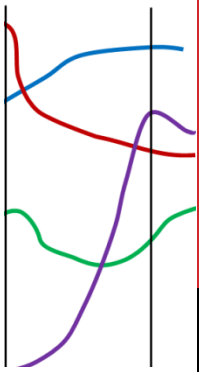






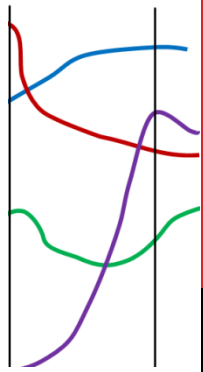


# THE FIRST LANGUAGE OF MIGRANTS



- if you
  - leave the country where your native language (L1) is spoken
  - speak another language regularly
- you may find odd and unexpected things happening to your L1
- these things are called ‘language attrition’

# A CASE IN POINT



25. Februar 2008 14:02



Steffi Graf moved to the US in 2000 and married a native speaker of English

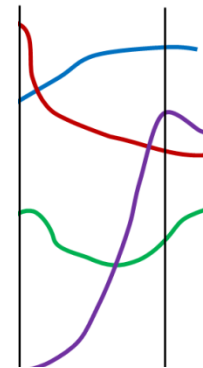
a speech she gave at a media award ceremony in 2008 was basically a train crash

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UDLEA3RvwuA>

(from min. 2:20)



# STEFANIE GRAF'S SPEECH



“Ich werde mich dem Deutsch v– ... versuchen”

\*I will t– ... try me to the German

“das ist leider ... nicht ganz so flüssig mehr ähm wie es war”

sadly it is ... not as fluent uhm as it used to be

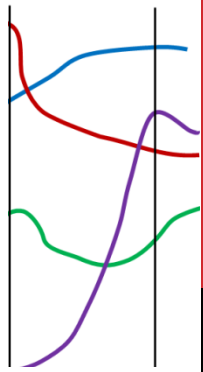
“aber ähm ich werd’s mich versuchen”

\*But I’ll it me try

“äh ich werd’s versuchen”

uh I’ll give it a go

# A CASE IN POINT



25. Februar 2008 14:02



**Steffi Graf**

**„Sorry, ich kann nicht mehr so gut Deutsch“**

Posten Sie (0)

© APA

0

Empfehle

Teilen

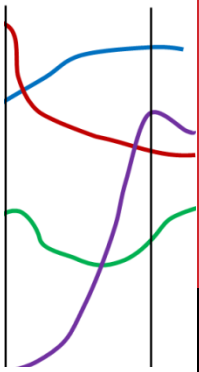
Twitter

Steffi Graf moved to the US in 2000 and married a native speaker of English

a speech she gave at a media award ceremony in 2008 was basically a train crash

this statement was clearly considered newsworthy

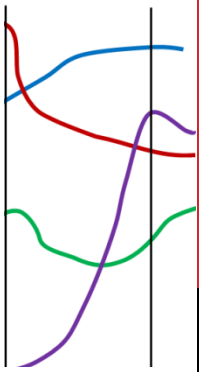
# WHAT TO EXPECT WHEN YOU'RE ATTRITING



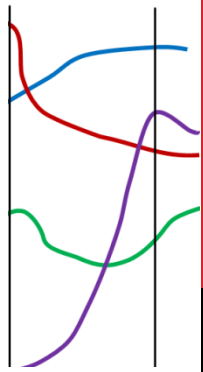
- you may produce:
  - sentences that go badly wrong
  - very disfluent speech (pauses, hesitations, *uhm* etc.)
  - borrowings and switches
  - a more or less pronounced foreign accent
  - very weird expressions

# WEIRD THINGS MIGRANTS SAY

- structures and idiomatic expressions are literally translated:
- English: *to run for office, to run short of something*
- Spanish: \**correr para gobernador*
- German: \**ich renne kurz an Briefpapier*



# WEIRD THINGS MIGRANTS SAY



- similarities and differences get confused ('false friends')

English

*ankle*

German

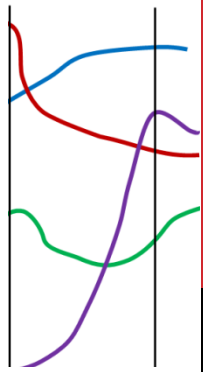
*Knöchel*

different sound,  
same meaning

*Enkel*

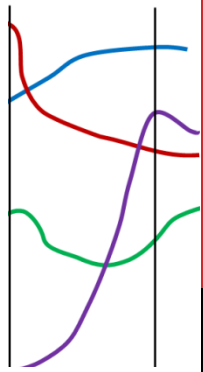
same sound,  
different meaning  
(‘grandchild’)

# WHY DOES THIS HAPPEN?



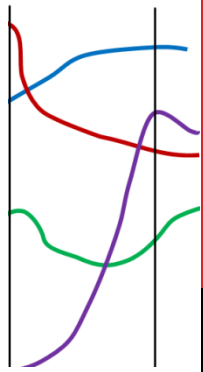
- people often assume that language attrition is a case of ‘forgetting’
- this would mean that it is linked to how often the speaker is exposed to her native language
- ‘use it or lose it’?

# WHAT IS 'FORGETTING'?



- the psychological literature distinguishes many very different phenomena of 'forgetting'
  - *decay*: if information is not recalled, the trace it has left in the brain dissipates => the information 'evaporates'
  - *suppression/repression*: the speaker intentionally does not activate/recall certain information
  - *interference*: more recently acquired information blocks the recall of stored information

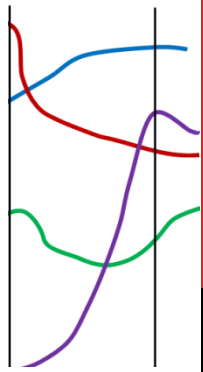
# DECAY: ACTIVATION THRESHOLD



- retrieving items from memory requires effort
- the more often and the more recently an item has been used
  - the lower the ‘activation threshold’ (= amount of energy necessary to recall it)
  - the easier it is to activate

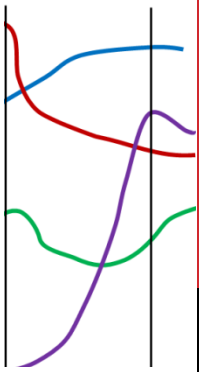


# SUPPRESSION: INHIBITION



- in order for a particular item to be selected, its activation has to exceed that of competitors
- competitors must be inhibited (their activation threshold must be raised)
- every time an item is selected, activation threshold of competitors is raised

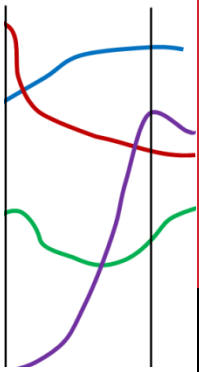
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- all available evidence suggests that attrition is not decay but suppression/interference

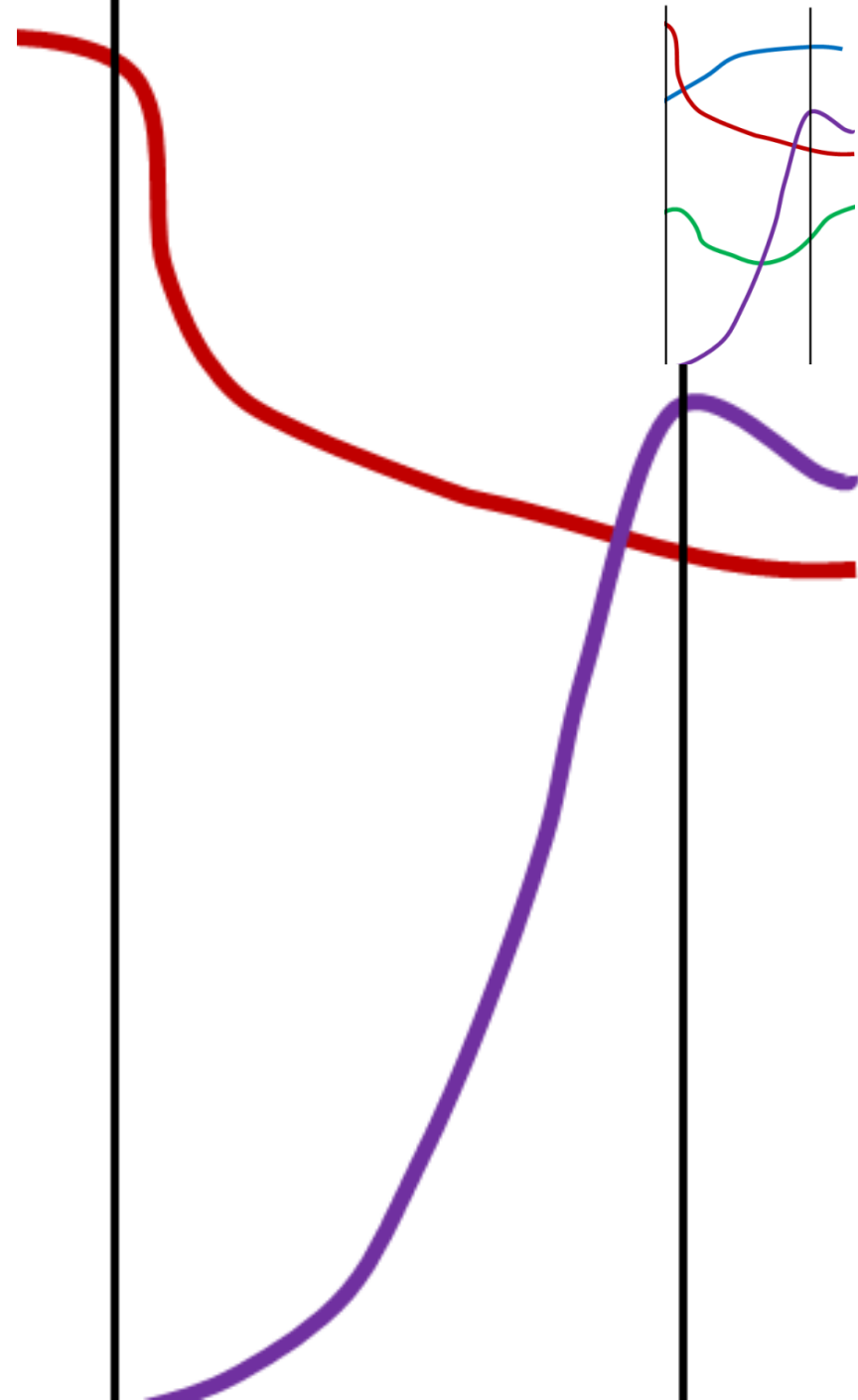
# FAILURE TO LAUNCH

- insufficient energy to ‘ignite’
- extra effort may be necessary
- once the language has caught on, it is a good idea to give it a good long run!
- then it should be absolutely fine



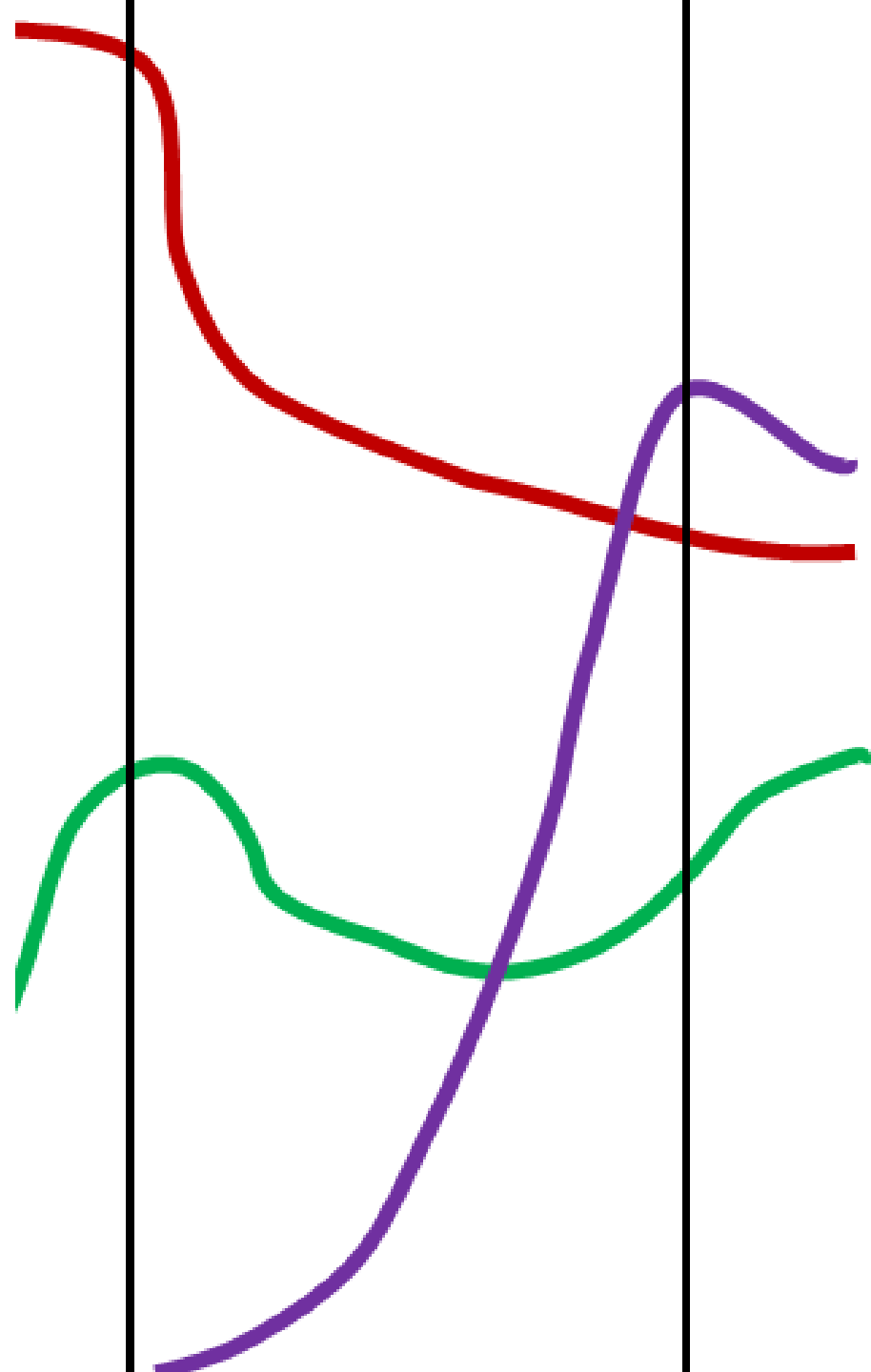
# TIMECOURSE

- effects of attrition are likely to be most pronounced:
  - soon after migration
  - when second language development is most intensive
  - particularly if the languages are similar
  - and they affect other foreign languages even more

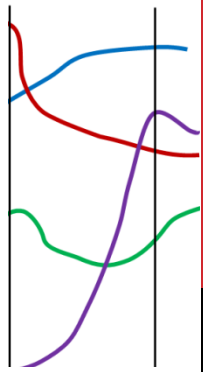


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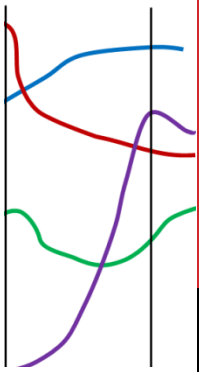


# MISCONCEPTIONS

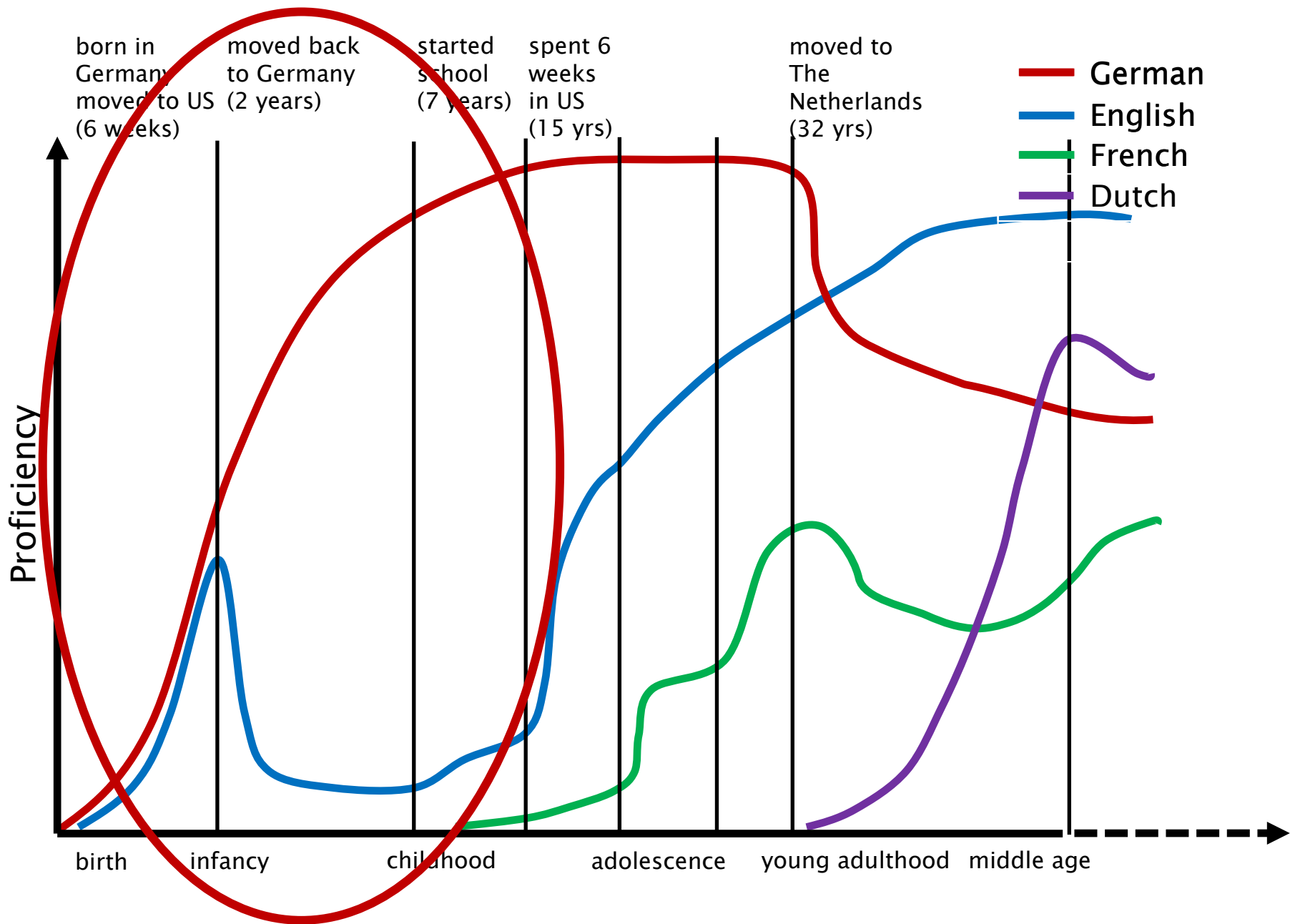


- attrition means that you ‘forget’ your native language
- attrition only happens when you do not speak your native language regularly
- attrition takes an extremely long time (many years)

## BY CONTRAST

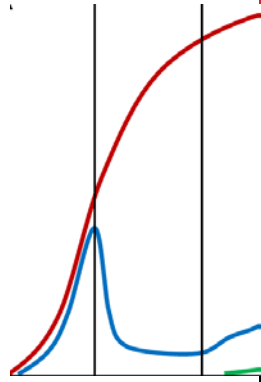


- the native language is harder to access due to inhibition and interference
- it happens whether or not you still speak your native language regularly
- it begins the moment you learn another language and is most pronounced in the early stages



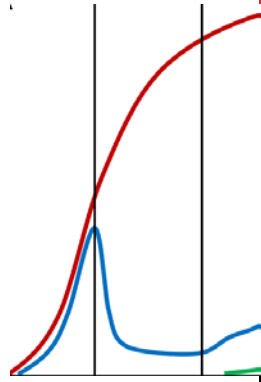


# EARLY ATTRITION



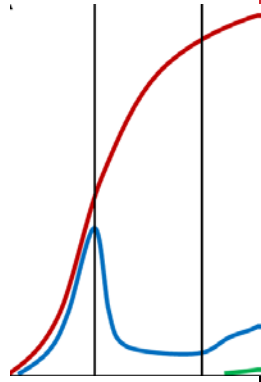
- when children are exposed to two languages, both languages develop more or less at the same rate (though there may be fluctuations)
- if exposure to one language ceases, attrition is rapid (months), catastrophic and permanent
- efforts to retrieve the language in adulthood show little permanent facilitation

# CHILDHOOD OVERHEARERS



- a language is used in the home but children are discouraged from speaking it
- can typically understand but not speak it later
- often have feelings of loss, guilt or shame
- “Growing up, the Welsh language was such a central part of my life and identity that forgetting it would have seemed as likely as my arm spontaneously falling off. And yet here I am, 10 years later, shamefully putting Welsh words into Google translate to make sure I’ve got them right.” (Ellie Mae O’Hagan, *Guardian*)

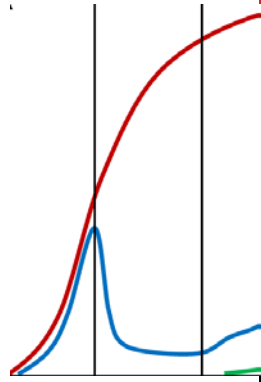
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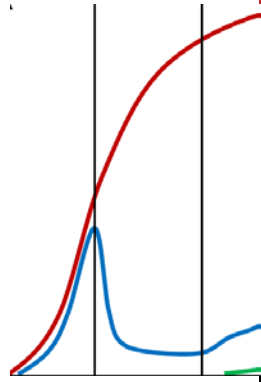
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# CHILDHOOD OVERHEARERS

- Melissa Lozada-Oliva, “My Spanish”
- [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fE-c4Bj\\_RT0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fE-c4Bj_RT0)

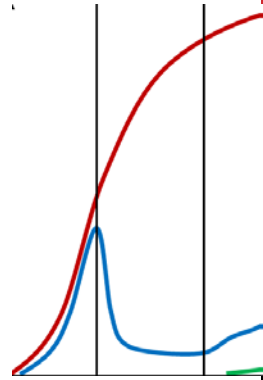


# RETURNEES



- early life is spent in a bilingual setting (one language in the home, one outside the home)
- parents then return to country of origin
- second language dissipates quickly
- this can be an extremely upsetting experience

# AN EMAIL FROM A RETURNEE



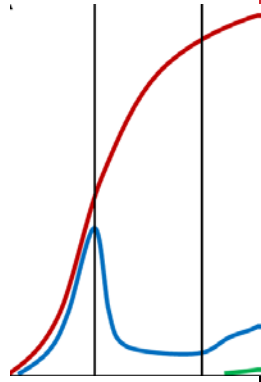
“[...] the second I tried to read the English text book given by our schools, I froze. I couldn't read anything on the page, and I couldn't pronounce the words correctly in my head.

I was extremely shocked and had no idea what to do, why this was happening to me, how to fix this, or even who to go to to get help.

[...] the loss of English meant the loss of the connection to my past, my present self, and the future that I had so dearly been looking forward to.

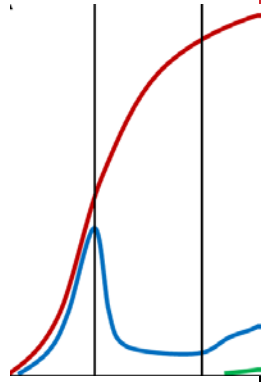
My vision began to get blurry, I couldn't think clearly as if I my brain was surrounded by a dense fog.”

# INTERNATIONAL ADOPTEES



- ‘sequential monolingualism’
- exposed to one language from birth
- exposed to new language after adoption
- language replacement happens within months
- later recovery is no easier than learning the language from scratch

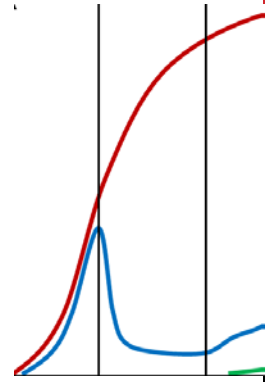
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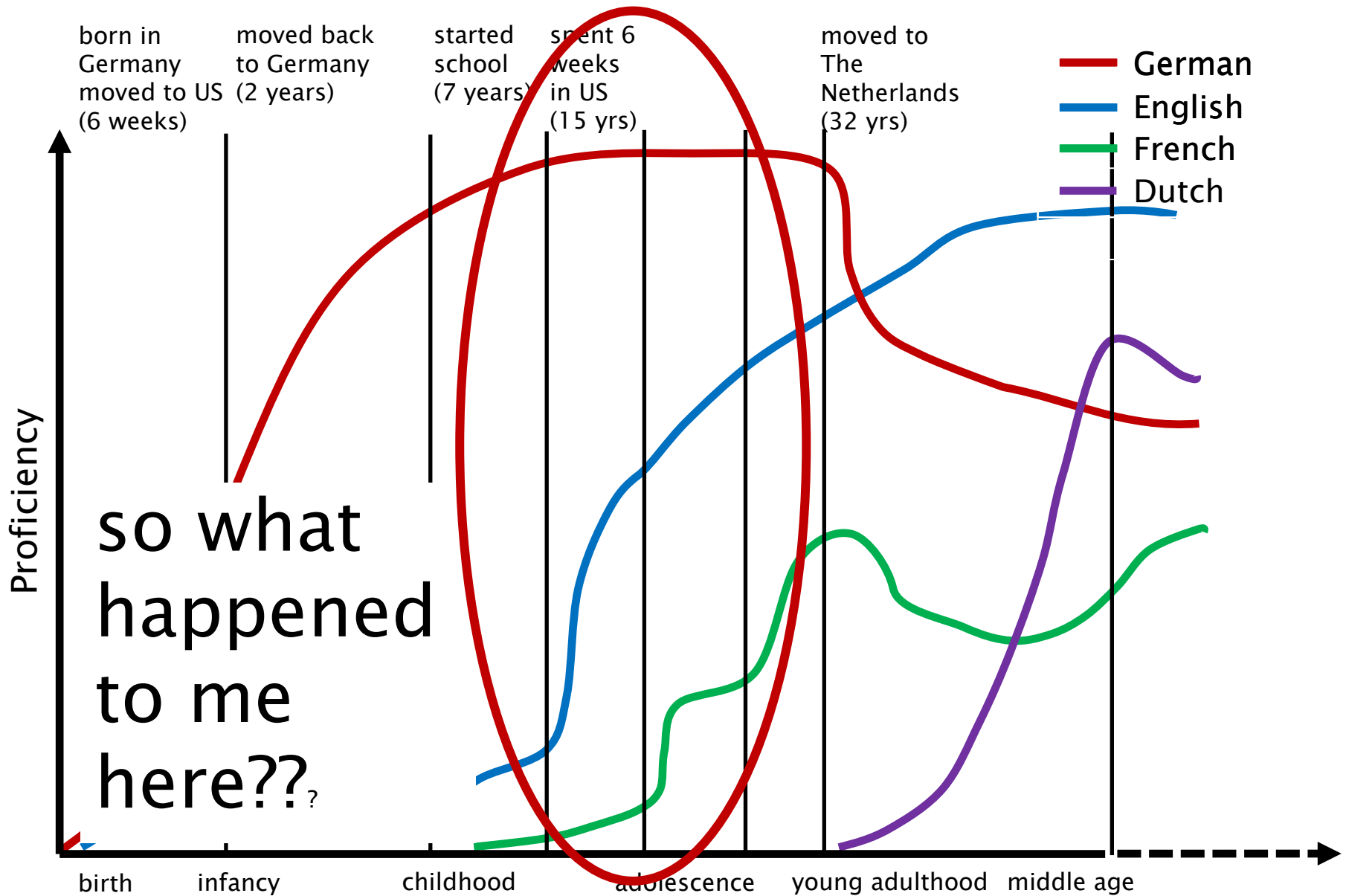
- study of Korean adoptees in France (Pallier et al. 2003)
  - tested as young adults
  - adopted age 3–10 (mean: 6.7)
  - speak French natively
  - cannot recognise very simple words in Korean
  - fMRI scans show no residual activation when they hear the language



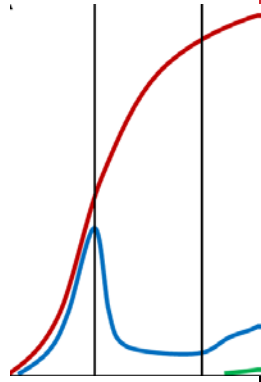
# EARLY ATTRITION



- in order to develop a full and stable language system, children need sustained input
- they have knowledge of the grammar of their language around age 5–6
- a consolidation period into adolescence is necessary for the language to stabilize
- after that, the language becomes largely impervious to dramatic loss

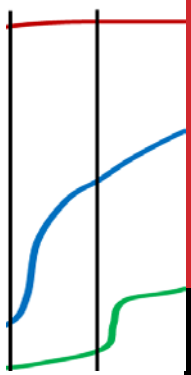


# WHEN IS THE LANGUAGE ACTUALLY 'LOST'?

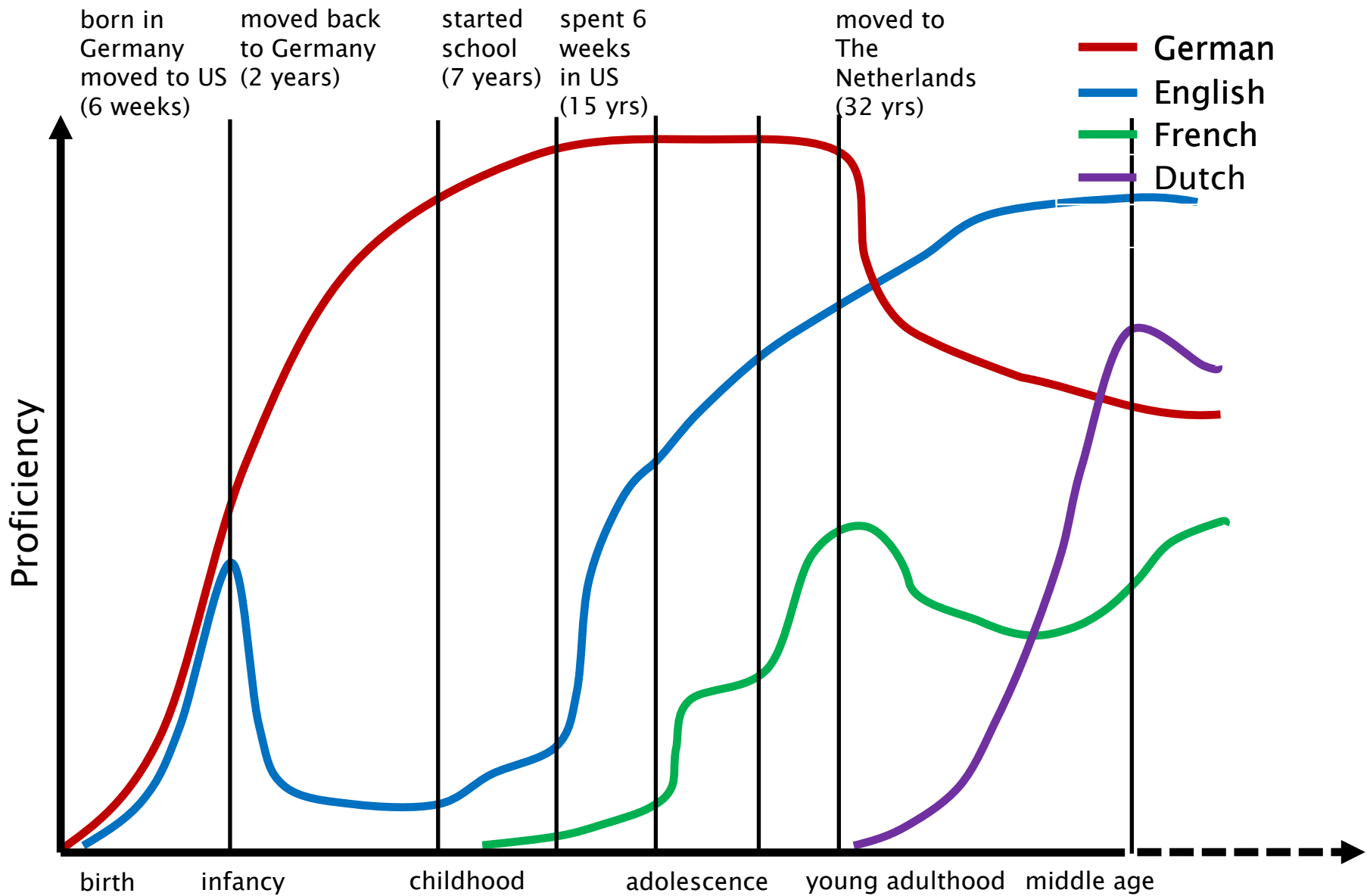


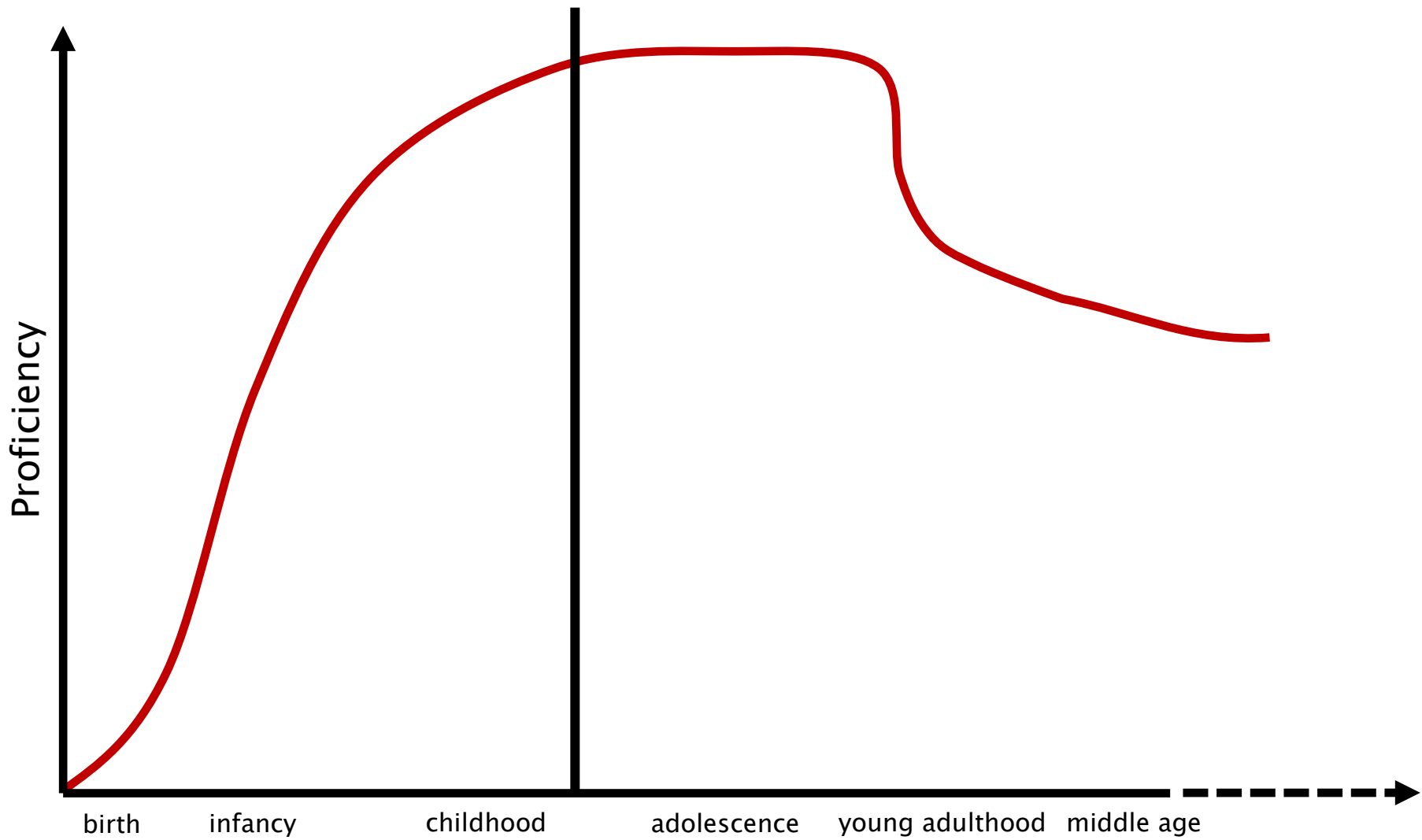
- reactivation seems possible for some time:
  - 16-year old American girl, adopted from Russia age 8
  - is still in contact with her grandmother regularly through Skype
  - has needed a translator to talk to her grandmother for several years
  - recently, she got a new counsellor who is also a native Russian speaker
  - she wrote a very expressive letter to her – in Russian!

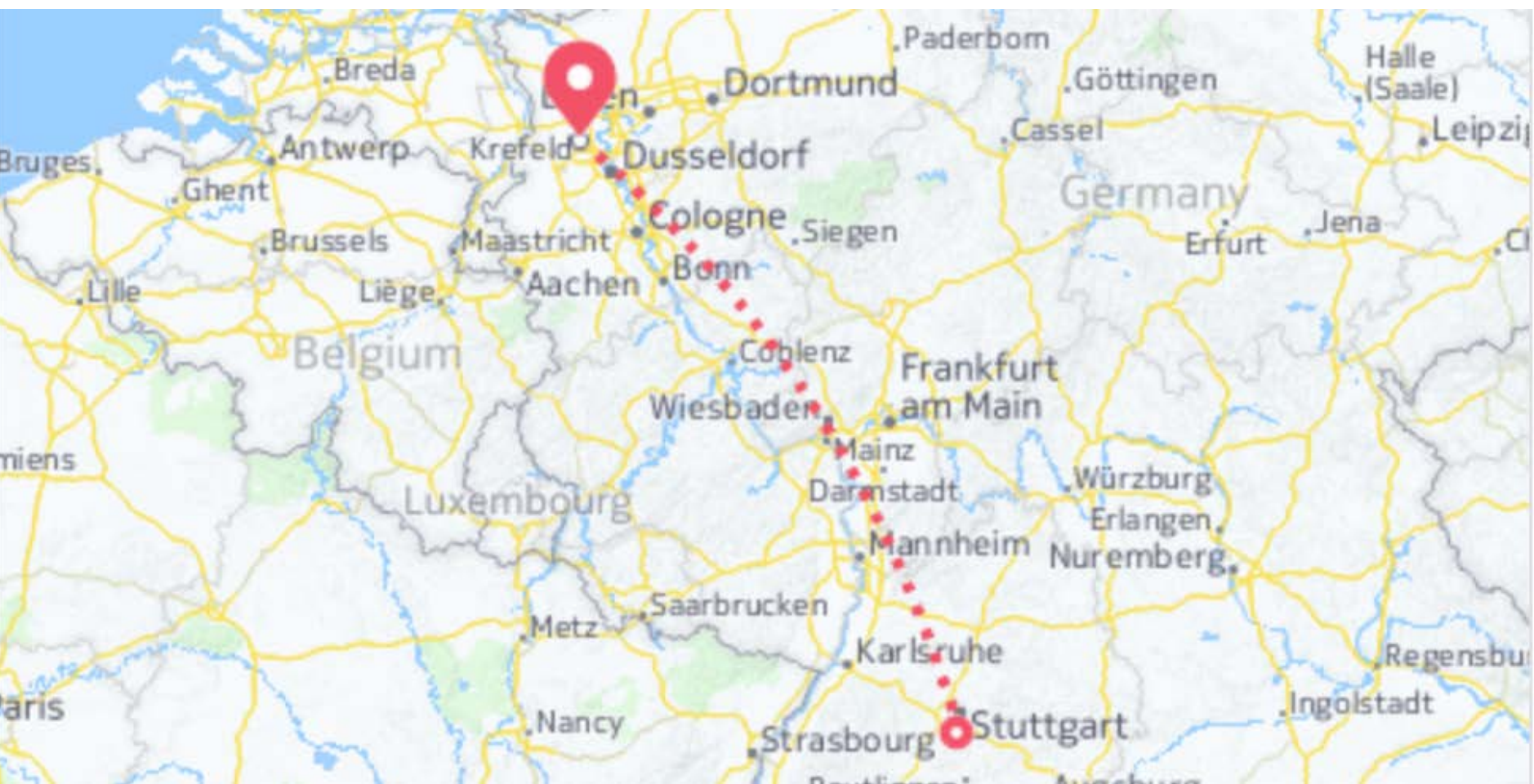
# LANGUAGE RECOVERY

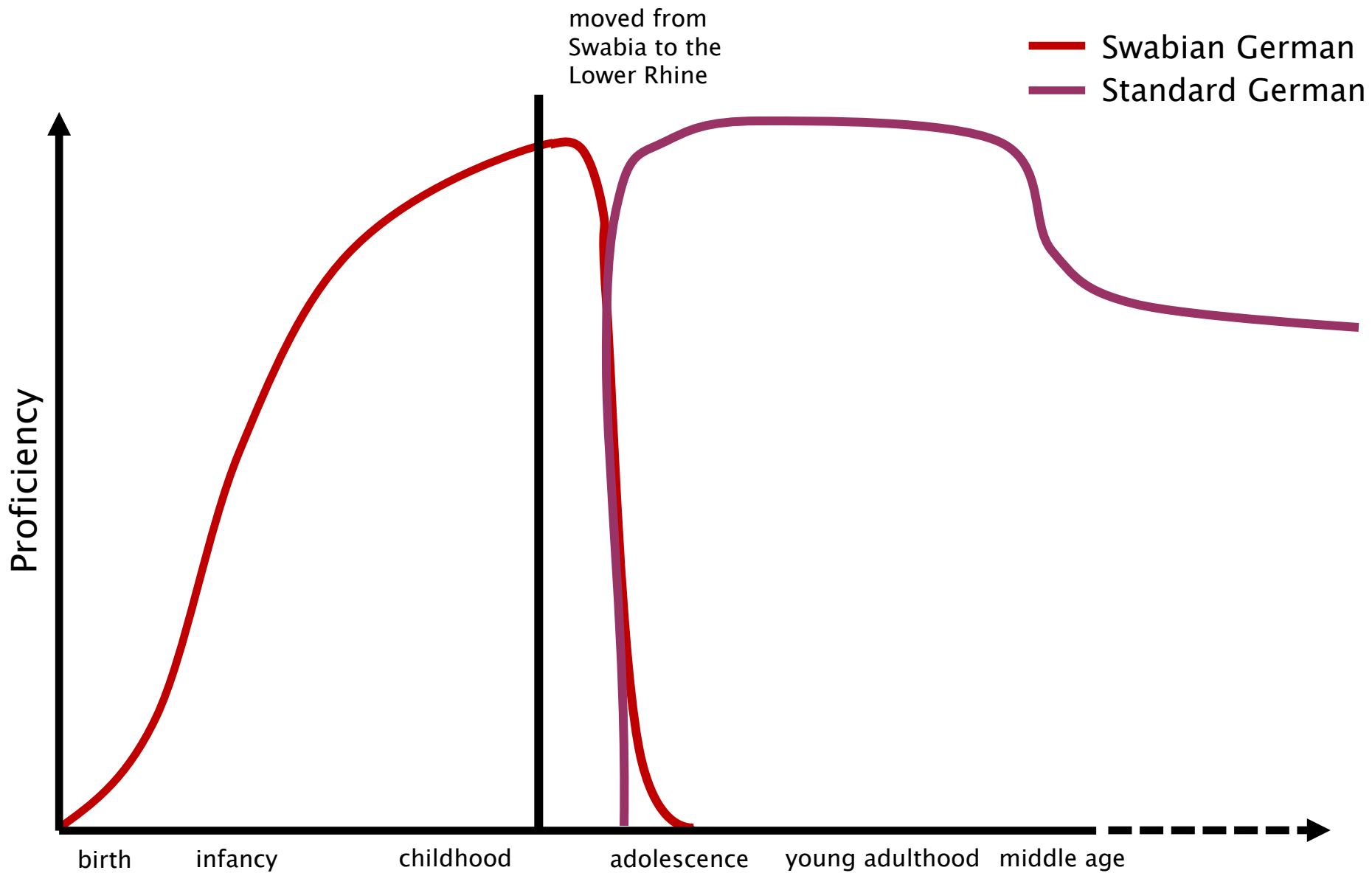


- these examples suggest that effects of early exposure last into puberty
- findings from adoptees attempting language recovery later (at university) indicate that there is an expiry date for such effects
- my own experience also seems to bear this out











Mother: Du wie war denn des, d’Kathrin hat g’sagt ihr seiet über de Zaun gschtiege?

*So how was that, Kathrin said you climbed over the fence?*

Monika: ich hab d’ Kathrin über de Zaun g’lupft

*I lifted Kathrin over the fence*

Mother: und dann isch die Monika au drübergschtiege?

*and then Monika climbed over as well?*

Monika: nein!

*no*

Mother: sondern?

*what then?*

Monika: ich ben dort hinte aufn Baum klettert und hab den Zaun nicht einmal berührt

*I climbed on the tree back there and didn’t even touch the fence!*

Mother: des isch trotzdem über de Zaun gange

*that’s still going over the fence*

Monika: [pause] ausserum dauerts so lang

*going around takes so long*



# MY LOST NATIVE LANGUAGE

- the dialect of the Swabian region was my first language
- when we moved, a different variety of this language moved into my brain
- it quickly took over every function that the dialect had previously had
- I continued to receive input in the dialect from my parents
- nevertheless, it is gone – probably irretrievably

# MY LOST NATIVE LANGUAGE

- losing a childhood language has consequences
- as a child, I was very close to my cousin (who is a dialect speaker)
- after I had lost the language we spoke with each other, our contact became very stilted and uncomfortable
- we still enjoy seeing each other, but there is a barrier



# THE PAIN OF NATIVE LANGUAGE LOSS

- these kinds of loss are made worse in cases where the two languages are not mutually intelligible
- and worse still when other family members don't speak the other language
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tU5Rnd-HM6A>

# THE PAIN OF NATIVE LANGUAGE LOSS

- these kinds of loss are made worse in cases where the two languages are not mutually intelligible
- and worse still when other family members don't speak the other language
- native language loss can cut off migrants' children from their extended family back home
- or even from their own parents in the case of foster children

# SPEAKING FROM THE HEART

- language is much more than a system of communication
- it links us to our identity and our deepest feelings
- emotional expressions have the deepest resonance and are felt most authentically in the language we learned as children from our parents
- uprooting it can leave permanent scars
- how deep they are will depend on the circumstances

# CAN YOU FORGET A LANGUAGE?

- languages that have been acquired
  - up to a reasonable level of proficiency
  - into puberty
- are extraordinarily resilient overall
- attrition effects may set the speaker apart, but do not affect the underlying fabric of the language
- knowledge remains intact, production can become difficult

# CAN YOU FORGET A LANGUAGE?

- if use stops before puberty, but exposure continues, comprehension remains but production is lost
- if both use and exposure stop, the language disappears entirely
- it may be reactivated for a time, but after that, it is lost irretrievably





Thank you for your attention!