Linguistic anthropologists have observed that people all over the world perceive languages, and speakers of those different languages, as fundamentally different from one another. When people listen to others’ speech, they hear discrete categorical boundaries even when differences in speech exist along a continuum. Our minds, and not just our ears, perceive these differences: we think of language X as being fundamentally different from language Y. From there, it is not a big leap to think of groups of speakers as being essentially different from one another: speakers of X are fundamentally different from speakers of Y.

You might assume that people are unconsciously conflating language with culture. After all, if someone speaks French fluently, they most likely come from France, where they were raised immersed in French culture. If that’s the case, people’s attitudes toward language could simply be a proxy for their attitudes toward perceived cultural differences across groups. But research suggests that people’s intuitions and misperceptions about the social life of language run much deeper than this, and manifest themselves in some surprising ways.

Indeed, people essentialize language. Psychological essentialism is the notion that particular groups of people are different because of some real, meaningful underlying essence that is present deep in their nature, and often biological in origin. So if you think that French speakers are fundamentally different from English speakers because of something about their essential nature or the biology they were born with—rather than the situational or cultural variable of having lived and been exposed to French rather than English—you are using essentialist reasoning. This common but misleading mental habit shapes our thinking in many domains.

…

In the real world, as we’ve seen, children are born with the remarkable ability to learn languages—but no child is born with the aptitude to speak any one in particular. Logically, speaking English rather than French, or Spanish rather than Japanese, could not possibly be codified in your DNA. It is rare to find an absolute truth in just about any field of study, but I will go out on a limb and say that if you are not exposed to French, there is about a zero percent chance that you will learn it.

But that doesn’t put the kibosh on the strange intuition that speaking one language over another is somehow written into the genetic code. As Steven Pinker writes in his seminal book *The Language Instinct*, which examines humans’ remarkable language learning abilities, this belief is widespread but utterly false:

“This folk myth is pervasive, like the claim of some French speakers that only those with Gallic blood can truly master the gender system, or the insistence of my Hebrew teacher that the assimilated Jewish students in his college classes innately outperformed their Gentile classmates. As far as the language
instinct is concerned, the correlation between genes and languages is a coincidence. People store genes in their gonads and pass them to their children through their genitals; they store grammars in their brains and pass them to their children through their mouths.”

Now, you might not need to be convinced that language is passed, as Pinker says, from people’s mouths, not their gonads. However, I have observed that even enlightened modern adults, young and old alike, sometimes think of others as defined by and linked to their native tongue, or to the native tongue of their biological forbears.

A colleague of mine is a psychology professor at a large university. In a particular class, she spends a day teaching about language acquisition, typically mentioning research on international adoptions, such as studies of Korean children adopted by French families, who grow up to speak French (and not Korean). She says it does not happen frequently, but every so often, a student will express surprise that an ethnically Asian child could learn French so well. When asked to explain their thinking, they offer the opinion that someone who is ethnically Asian would have an easier time learning a “typically Asian” language; French was better suited to white children. In truth, any child can learn any language; it’s just a matter of being exposed to it. But some adults hold the mistaken belief that something about your genes specifies which language it would be easier for you to learn—even as a baby.

To give another example, a (white, Midwestern-accented) friend of mine recently told me the following story. Her cousin adopted twin African American girls, at age one and a half. The cousin had suffered from infertility for years and desperately wanted a baby; when the opportunity arose to have two at once, she was overjoyed. Fast-forward 11 years, and the girls are becoming adolescents. They are rebelling and finding their own footing, like adolescents everywhere. And their quest for self-definition has extended to their speech.

Recently, the twins’ mom shared, her daughters sounded different to her. As she struggled to articulate this idea, she mentioned to her cousin (my friend) that she thought they sounded Black. Trying to figure out why their speech had suddenly changed, she mused aloud. Perhaps their biological mom (whom she had never met) had spoken a dialect of African American English. Maybe the twins were exposed to this dialect early in life and it stuck, somehow. Or maybe it was transferred in utero, or inherited in their DNA? Could that be why, all of a sudden, it sounded like they were speaking differently?

Of course, the answer is that no dialect of English had been handed down in the girls’ DNA. This is simply impossible. Dialects (and all languages) are learned via linguistic exposure. For the twins, like for anyone, their changing speech must reflect changing conversations and social role models in their environment. Yet, you can see in the mom’s thinking linguistic essentialism, clear as day.

Studies of children provide some insight into adults’ puzzling intuitions about language and where those languages may come from. Some fascinating evidence suggests that children start out with a pretty naive theory, thinking that learning a specific language (such as French instead of English) comes from biology, not environment. Some adults may hold on to this childhood intuition, even after experience should have debunked it.

In one experiment that nicely demonstrated children’s thinking, Susan Gelman and Lawrence Hirschfeld gave Michigan preschoolers a “switched at birth” task. Children learned of two families —the Smiths and
the Joneses. One spoke English and the other Portuguese. Now, say the Smiths (the English speakers) have a baby, and the baby immediately goes to live with the Jones family (the Portuguese speakers). When that baby grows up and learns to talk, will she speak English or Portuguese?

You can see how this experiment cleverly pits children’s beliefs about nature and language against the concept of nurture and language. Does the hypothetical child grow up to speak the language of her birth parents, which would mean that language is biologically transferred? Or does she instead speak the language of her adoptive parents, which would mean that language is learned from the environment?

Five-year-old children chose the “biological” answer. Hearing these simple vignettes, they concluded that the hypothetical child would grow up to speak the language of her birth parents, though the child lacked exposure to that language. In jumping to this conclusion, these children are following in the footsteps of the Egyptian king in Herodotus’s story—the ruler who thought that by rearing children in linguistic isolation, he could determine their “true” language. It seems that some adults may still hold on to this incorrect childhood intuition about where language comes from—and what this intuition represents.