

not see, literally and figuratively, and the one he never heard from—remained hidden until he died. His death, sadly, set me free.

My attention turns to an article about *Don't Ask, Don't Tell*, the law enacted in 1993 under then-president Bill Clinton. As an effort to abolish the ban against homosexuals serving in the military, it was well intentioned. The author of the article argues for its repeal, suggesting that the law has caused far more harm than good. Servicepersons are forced to lie or leave; officers are forced to lie or look away. For me, a much larger and far more painful truth is revealed: we are asking others to be someone they are not.

Identity is a curious thing. We tend to use the notion of “identity” to build social categories and taxonomies that we can analyze and use to make sense of the world around us. In that simple process, such “truths” become codified, whether in law or social structure; and then the structure, something we have invented, becomes immutable truth. All the while, though, real people have real identities, real changes, and real upheavals. Identity is fleeting, transient and fluid. That we could not imagine, *cannot* imagine, identity as anything other than fixed and unchanging is not simply a poor way to run a military (or raise a family), but also a tragic way to try to manage peoples lives. To demand that military personnel put their identity on a shelf while they serve is a painful compromise. At present, military personnel are given essentially three options: lie and stay in, be out and get tossed out, or die. This resonates with me.

I watched my father take his last breath, and in that sad moment I also realized that a part of me had been released. The hidden part, the side of me that was always compromised, was at last free to emerge. It was a liberating feeling at a time when, according to most social expectations, I should have been deeply saddened by a permanent loss. There are certainly many arenas other than the military where we are placed in a position to subordinate our identity to someone else's idea of who we must be. Family is one; other examples abound. The case of the military is one place, though, where we could, if we chose to do so, open the door to an important freedom of identity. It should not be so hard to do.

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## Society for Linguistic Anthropology

JAMES STANLAW AND MARK ALLEN PETERSON, CONTRIBUTING EDITORS

### Learn a Language, Develop Musical Skill

By James Stanlaw

“You Can Develop Musical Skill Comparable to Hendrix and Sinatra—If You Learn an East

Asian Language,” or so claims the May 21, 2009 issue of the *Metro*, a London commuter-freesheet cousin of the *Daily Mail*, speaking of the work of UC San Diego psychology professor Diana Deutsch. “I swear I’m not making this up: take Chinese lessons and you can be like Jimi Hendricks, that’s their take,” says Edinburgh linguist Geoffrey Pullum on the University of Pennsylvania’s blog Language Log. Exaggerated or not, Deutsch’s work on musical perception for the past decade as has been getting front page media attention from the *New York Times* (November 5, 1999) to the *Scientific American* (May 2009) to the *BBC Music Magazine* (July 2009).

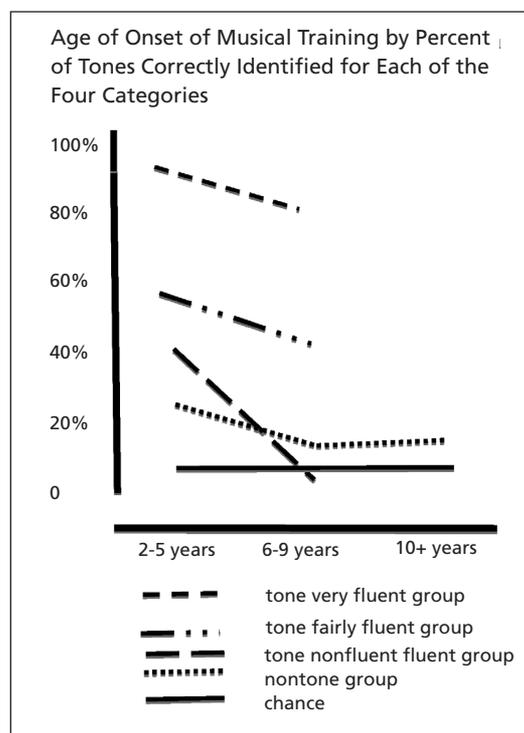


Figure courtesy Diana Deutsch, UC San Diego ([www.eurekalert.org/multimedia/pub/14160.php?from=137231](http://www.eurekalert.org/multimedia/pub/14160.php?from=137231))

I talked with Deutsch by phone about her recent work, which was just published in the *Journal of the Acoustical Society of America* with psychologist Kevin Dooley and music colleagues Trevor Henthorn and Brian Head. Although speaking a tone language may not win you a Grammy, they did find that possessing “absolute pitch”—the ability that some people have to identify a musical note without reference to any other—seems to correlate very strongly with the kind of language you speak. Simply put, though the presence of absolute pitch is extremely rare in North Americans and Europeans—something less than 1 in 10,000—it seems to be much more prevalent in speakers of tone languages. For example, in 2004 Deutsch found that Chinese music students at the Central Conservatory of Music in Beijing were nine times more likely to have absolute pitch than students at the Eastman School of Music in New York.

But to claim categorically that there is a connection between tone language and the ability to identify absolute pitch, at least three

variables must be controlled for: (1) musical training, (2) race and/or ethnic background, and (3) type of language. For example, perhaps musicians starting their training early are more likely to have absolute pitch regardless of their native language. Or perhaps absolute pitch is something more typically found, say, in people of Chinese heritage regardless of where they live.

In an ingenious experiment, Deutsch and her colleagues tested 203 subjects from the Thornton School of Music at the University of Southern California, all about 19 years of age with roughly similar numbers of men and women. A questionnaire was given, and subjects were grouped into one of four categories based on language: (1) “nontone,” Caucasian speakers whose native language was not a tone language; (2) “tone very fluent,” speakers who reported that they speak an East Asian tone language very fluently; (3) “tone fairly fluent,” speakers who said they had some proficiency in an East Asian tone language, and (4) “tone nonfluent,” people who could understand an East Asian tone language, but didn’t speak it. They were also asked when they began their musical training (at 2–5 years, 6–9 years, or after 10 years of age).

Subjects were then tested for absolute pitch by being asked to identify 36 notes (a sample of this test can taken at [www.acoustics.org/press/157th/deutschSound1.mp3](http://www.acoustics.org/press/157th/deutschSound1.mp3)). The findings were clear, as seen in the figure below. First, all those who began their musical training early were more likely to have absolute pitch than those who started later, regardless of language group. But there was a remarkable language effect. About 90% of those who spoke a tone language very fluently possessed absolute pitch. This was not only substantially higher than the figure for the nontone group, it was also significantly higher than the percentage of people with absolute pitch in the tone nonfluent and tone fairly fluent groups. In addition, to control for a possible environmental effect, the very fluent speakers were divided into two groups: those who had been born in the US or arrived here before the age of 9, and those who arrived after the age of 9. There was no significant difference in the performance between these two groups.

But what does this mean? Most great Western musicians do not have absolute pitch, and those that do have it are not necessarily great musicians. Nor does it seem to be something that can be taught. It might also seem puzzling to find a connection between tone languages and absolute pitch. Even assuming Deutsch’s claims hold true for all the world’s tone languages, one could ask why absolute pitch would be involved, seeing as tones in language are largely relative distinctions. And what might the evolutionary significance be? It is these issues that we will take up in our next column.

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