

The Ecstasy Hypothesis

Stephen Krashen

Peerspectives, 14: 7-9, 2015. (Kanda University of International Studies)

<http://peerspectivesonline.org>.

A pretty girl is like a melody
That haunts you night and day

Just like the strain of a haunting refrain
She'll start upon a marathon
And run around your brain

You can't escape, she's in your memory
By morning, night and noon

She will leave you and then come back again
A pretty girl is just like a pretty tune

(Irving Berlin)

Abstract

The "Din in the Head" is involuntary mental rehearsal of language that is a result of obtaining comprehensible and interesting input. Murphey (1990) has suggested that similar kinds of "dins" occur in areas other than language: music, visual experiences, and movement (e.g. dance). There might also be an intellectual din. Dins occur after we perceive novel stimuli: after hearing or reading language containing as yet unacquired vocabulary or syntax, hearing a new melody, after seeing or creating a particularly striking scene, learning a new movement, or developing a new understanding. The "Dins" are often perceived to be pleasant. There is one kind of Din that can be more than pleasant: infatuation, which occurs after encountering someone new. Infatuation produces a chemical reaction in the brain that produces a kind of ecstasy. This leads to a conjecture: The different Dins discussed here have a similar basis. They produce involuntary mental activity that can be pleasant and even ecstatic.

The Din in the Head

A linguist/archeologist, Elizabeth Barber, introduced the idea of the Din in the Head into the professional literature. She noted that after three days of using her (intermediate level) Russian while working at the Hermitage in Leningrad, she noticed "a rising din of Russian in my head: words, sounds, intonations, all swimming about in the voices of the people I talked with ... The constant rehearsal of these phrases of course was making it easier and easier to speak quickly ..." (Barber, 1980, p. 30).

Krashen (1983) speculated that this "din in the head" might be a sign that language acquisition was taking place, that it was a result of the operation of the language acquisition device. If so, this predicts that the Din would be more frequent with those who were still in the process of language acquisition, and would be less frequent with very advanced language users,

that it would be stimulated by comprehension, and that it would help language users overcome shyness in using the language.

These predictions were confirmed in subsequent studies: The Din was indeed more frequent among less advanced users (Parr and Krashen, 1986), was more likely to happen after users were exposed to comprehensible input as compared to form-based activities (Bedford, 1986; deGuerrero, 1987), and experiencing the Din made students less reluctant to speak (deGuerrero, 1987; McQuillan and Rodrigo, 1995). Seville (1992) demonstrated that children acquiring English as a second language also experience the Din in the Head.

The Reading Din

McQuillan and Rodrigo (1995) noted that Bedford (1986) reported that about half of his subjects experienced the Din after reading. McQuillan and Rodrigo's subjects were students in Spanish classes that included a considerable amount of reading, self-selected and required: 57% reported "hearing the Din after reading Spanish that I can understand."

The Din after reading has also been reported among first language readers after self-selected reading of texts with new linguistic elements, e.g. authors who write in unusual styles (McQuillan, 1996). McQuillan noted that his subjects did not report the Din "from routine reading done for work or school, or from very familiar prose texts such as newspapers or magazines" (p. 313).

Other Dins

The Melody Din

Murphey (1990) noted the similarity between the Din for language and the "song stuck in my head" phenomenon; his informal data revealed what readers of this paper already know - it is an extremely common experience. According to my experience, this happens with a new melody, and sometimes it happens with an old one that I haven't heard in a long time. It is usually (but not always) a melody I really like, and I often have a compulsion to play it on the piano. After a while, the Melody Din calms down. (For an example of a Melody Din that wouldn't go away, see an episode of Regular Show, "This is my jam." [<http://www.tv.com/shows/regular-show/this-is-my-jam-1377601/>])

This is in contrast to what happens when I hear a very familiar melody that I like. There is real pleasure, but it is gentler than the kind of strong reaction I have when it is a new melody.

The Visual Din

Citing Ruth Weir's 1962 book, *Language in the Crib*, Murphey (1990) suggests that "some people may experience a visual din. Artists have told me that when working intensely on a painting, they can't get the image out the their heads, that it stays with them when they leave the studio and comes to them at strange moments" (p. 75). I have experienced this as well, after seeing a particularly striking series of paintings.

The Kinesthetic Din

Murphey (1990) also discusses "involuntary kinesthetic rehearsal," which can happen when an athlete or dancer is involved in learning new movements, and finds him or herself spontaneously

doing part of the new movement unexpectedly.

The Intellectual Din

My hope is that this paper will cause an Intellectual Din, that it will be on readers' minds for at least a little while.

I suspect that productive intellectual workers have routines for getting the Intellectual Din moving, warm up routines that start them thinking about their current project each day, and that get them enthusiastic for work. Once the Din starts, it may be so pleasant, so engaging, that it is hard to stop. Many of us can agree with Flaubert and Vidal:

Flaubert: "I have the peculiarity of a camel - I find it difficult to stop once I get started and hard to start after I've been resting" (Murray, 1990, p. 31).

Gore Vidal: "I'm always reluctant to start work, and reluctant to stop" (Kellog, 1994, p. 192).

It seems to take daily sessions to keep the Din going, and it can be hard to get it going again: "If Charles Dickens missed a day of writing, "he needed a week of hard slog to get back into the flow" (Hughes, in Plimpton, 1999, p. 247).

Infatuation

Murphey (1990) mentions that there may be a connection between infatuation and the Din. Infatuation is of course involuntary mental activity, and like other Dins is caused by a novel stimulus, in this case, a new person. Like other Dins, infatuation eventually goes away, often to be replaced by a more enduring if less sensational kind of pleasure.

Research on infatuation has revealed that it has a chemical basis: infatuation is associated with the release of phenylethylamine, a neurotransmitter that stimulates the release of dopamine and norepinephrine and powerful feelings of "elation, exhilaration, and euphoria" (Fisher, 1984, p. 52), extremely pleasant when the infatuation is shared, but problematic when it is not.

Conjecture

Could all "Dins in the Head" have a similar chemical basis? This would explain the pleasure often associated with the Dins, and provide an explanation for sublimation: We substitute the Intellectual, Melody, or Kinesthetic Din for the Infatuation Din when relationships don't go right and we are "trying to get that feeling again" (song by David Pomeranz, recorded by Barry Manilow in 1976).

If the Dins are similar, it suggests that many kinds of "learning" can be extremely pleasant, and may even result in mild feelings of ecstasy. This includes language acquisition via comprehensible input. It is tragic that so few people have experienced the Language Din and tragic that their classroom experiences give them so little pleasure.

References

- Barber, E. (1980). Language acquisition and applied linguistics. *ADFL Bulletin*, 12, 26-32.
- Bedford, E. J. W. (1985). Spontaneous playback of the second language: A descriptive study. *Foreign Language Annals*, 18, 279-287.
- de Guerrero, M. C. M. (1987). The din phenomenon: Mental rehearsal in the second language. *Foreign Language Annals* 20, 537-548.
- Fisher, H. (1984). *The anatomy of love*. Ballantine Books.
- Kellogg, R. (1994). *The psychology of writing*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Krashen, S. (1983). The din in the head, input, and the language acquisition device. *Foreign Language Annals*, 16, 41-44.
- McQuillan, J. (1996). Reading, language acquisition and the "Din in the Head": Involuntary mental rehearsal in the first language. *ITL Review of Applied Linguistics*, 113, 305-320.
- McQuillan, J. & Rodrigo, V. (1995). A reading "din in the head": Evidence of involuntary mental rehearsal in second language readers. *Foreign Language Annals*, 28, 330-336.
- Murray, D. (1990). *Shoptalk: Learning to write with writers*. Westport, CT: Boynton Cook.
- Murphey, T. (1990). The song stuck in my head phenomenon: A melodic din in the LAD? *System*, 18(1), 53-64.
- Parr, P. & Krashen, S. (1986). Involuntary rehearsal of second languages in beginning and advanced performers. *System*, 14, 275-278.
- Plimpton, G. (1999). *The writer's chapbook*. New York: Modern Library.
- Sevilla, J. (1996). Involuntary rehearsal of second language at the elementary level: Do elementary school children experience the din in the head? *System*, 24(1), 101-105.