

# What young children do when they hear a foreign language

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Raymond Chen

My young nieces live in a Chinese-speaking household, which is great for them because it means that when they grow up, they will be fluent in two languages. But it makes things a bit tricky at the beginning. The niece who is the subject of this story had just turned two at the time this story takes place, so her language skills even in Chinese are pretty rudimentary. Her language skills in English are restricted to a collection of set phrases like *Excuse me!*, *I'm sorry!*, *What'you doing?*, *I want ice cream!*, and any catch phrase from the character *Dora the Explorer*. (I'm also fairly sure she doesn't know what *What'you doing?* actually means. She'll come into a room and say, *What'you doing?* and then appear completely uninterested in the answer. I think she believes it to be a form of greeting and not an actual question.) She also loves to answer the phone, and this usually isn't a problem since most callers are relatives who can speak Chinese. But occasionally, it'll be somebody who speaks only English. (In general, these are just telemarketers, since most members of the household use their mobile phones as their main number.) Sometimes she'll run to the phone, pick it up, say “喂” (Hello), listen for a few seconds, and then just hang up. — *Who was that on the phone?* we'll ask. “人” is her one-word reply. It's hard to explain why this is a funny answer. The word 人 means *man*, *person*, so her response was a casual “A person.” The offhand way she says it expresses her attitude that “The purpose of the telephone is to amuse me, but this was just some guy who provided no entertainment at all.” The 人 phase lasted for only a month or so. In the next phase, she still picked up the phone and hung up when there was somebody speaking English on the other end, but when we asked her who it was, she gave a more detailed reply:

“有人說 A B C ”, which translates roughly as “It's some guy speaking A-B-C.” (“A-B-C” being her word for the English language.)