

# Clue to impressive performance lies in the upbringing

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Perhaps you saw the recent BBC drama series, *The Fall*, set in Belfast. It won't have been to everyone's taste – it was about a serial murderer. But I enjoyed it, and I was especially impressed by the leading actress, Gillian Anderson.

Many people know her from the American TV series *The X-Files*, where she played the FBI agent Scully. The remarkable thing about her performance in *The Fall*, though, was that she played the part of an Englishwoman, detective Stella Gibson. And she had an absolutely impeccable English accent. You couldn't hear anything at all to indicate she was American – and as a linguist, I was listening very hard for clues. Even the most brilliant of actors, Meryl Streep for instance, however good they are at imitating a particular accent, usually give the game away through small phonetic details. But not Gillian. Many people do switch from one accent to another for various reasons, but they very rarely do it so perfectly. How could she manage it?

Apparently her English accent is entirely genuine. She grew up in England and went to school here. Then, when she



■ *The Fall* – serial killer Paul Spector (Jamie Dornan), left, and DSI Stella Gibson (Gillian Anderson).

Picture: BBC/ARTISTS STUDIO/STEFFAN HILL

was eleven, her American parents took her to live in America, where she also acquired a perfectly genuine American accent. That number – eleven – was crucial. Much older, and she would never have acquired the American accent so perfectly. Much younger, and she would have totally lost her English accent. As it was, she ended up being completely bilingual or, rather, bi-accentual. On YouTube you can see an interview with an American woman called Gillian Anderson by Jay Leno, and another interview by Michael Parkinson of a Gillian Anderson who is obviously English.

Human beings are genetically programmed to learn perfectly any

language they are sufficiently exposed to – up to the age of about eight. Equally, they are likely to forget the language completely if exposure stops around that age. From eight onwards, this innate ability gradually tails off until it disappears completely by about 14 – it's a rare person who can learn a language perfectly after that age. Gillian at eleven was probably at exactly the right age to have a brain flexible enough to acquire a new language variety, but mature enough not to lose an old one. If you want your children to have a Norfolk accent, as I'm sure you do, keep them in the county until they're at least eleven. And whatever you do, don't send them away to boarding school.