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Defining language attrition

Eine Konsequenz von Migration ist meist ein radikaler Wandel der sprachlichen Umgebung und Gewohnheiten. Die Dominanz der Zweitsprache im Alltag leitet oft zu Veränderungen in der Erstsprache. Solche Veränderungen können vom Sprecher und auch von zurückgebliebenen Familienangehörigen und Freunden als unnatürlich und schockierend empfunden werden. Die vorliegende Einleitung gibt einen Überblick, welche Arten von Einfluss der Zweit- auf die Erstsprache im allgemeinen erscheinen, und in welcher Weise Charakteristika der Person, der Umgebung, der inneren Haltung und der Sprachgewohnheiten einen solchen Sprachwandel beschleunigen oder verlangsamen können.

Preconceptions

The loss of a native language is often experienced as something profoundly moving, disturbing or shocking, both by those who experience it and by those who witness it in others: “To lose your own language was like forgetting your mother, and as sad, in a way”, because it is “like losing part of one’s soul” is how Alexander McCall Smith puts it (*The Full Cupboard of Life*, p. 163). This intuitive appeal of the topic of language attrition can be seen as both a blessing and a curse. Researchers who investigate level-ordered morphology or articulatory phonetics will probably rarely find that their friends and family, or even colleagues who work in different areas, show great interest in or enthusiasm for their work. Those of us who study language attrition find ourselves with a much more receptive audience. On the other hand, we also find an audience with many preconceived ideas about attrition – a much rarer problem for the level-ordered morphologist or articulatory phonetician. Worse, we may find such notions in ourselves. Preconceived ideas are unscientific. They are also often wrong.

Here is a random collection of widely repeated, sometimes contradictory, and hitherto largely unsubstantiated ideas about the attrition process:

1. Attrition is the reversal of acquisition
2. Attrition usually takes place within the first 10 years of emigration
3. Attrition does not set in until 10 years after emigration
4. Attrition is most severe where the two language systems have similarities
5. Attrition is most severe the more different the two language systems are
6. Attrition is most severe in cases

where there is little or no contact with other speakers of the language

Like urban myths, such notions have the appeal that they may seem convincing, even likely, but they lack a solid basis in empirical fact. Put to the test, some of these may turn out to be correct. Until they are, however, it is counterproductive to repeat them as if they were established fact.

Another less-than-helpful phenomenon to be witnessed in attrition research is the proliferation of metaphors from daily life. One monograph on attrition (Ammerlaan 1996) is entitled “...you get a bit wobbly”, which is the second half of a quote from an attriter who compared his L1 skills to riding a bicycle - you never forget how to do it, but due to lack of practice you may get a bit wobbly (unsurprisingly, the L1 in this case was Dutch). A workshop at the 3rd International Symposium on Bilingualism (Bristol 2001) bore the title “Can spiders forget how to spin webs?” Others have compared attrition to an onion (which unpeels in layers), a derelict house (affected only slightly at first, but after a few decades the very foundations go as decomposition accelerates) and so on. But human linguistic knowledge is entirely different from the knowledge we apply to riding a bicycle or the ‘knowledge’ that a spider applies to spinning a web. It also bears no resemblance whatsoever to onions or houses.

There is a possible reason for the proliferation of both myths and metaphors in language attrition research which it might be profitable to explore. Within our frame of the experience of language, attrition is an unnatural process. Any other situation in which we experience language, particularly when it comes to a change within our own linguistic repertoire, is a social

one: L1 acquisition, L2 learning, communication, language for creative purposes, and so on. Wherever we encounter language, it is inseparably linked to contact with other human beings. Language is arguably what makes us part of a community or a relationship.

Attrition, on the other hand, is often felt most keenly where it is associated with loneliness or isolation. Although an emigrant may be an active member of an L2 community, in which she has a large circle of friends, there is often a sense of loss and nostalgia with respect to the L1 community. Attrition can represent the tangible symptom of this disconnectedness and severance. Someone who has lived halfway across the globe away from their family and childhood friends may encounter an inexplicable feeling of estrangement when they meet them again after many years, and although there can be many cultural reasons for this estrangement, the experience that you can no longer interact as spontaneously and naturally in your L1 as you once could can serve as the point on which such feelings can be focussed. A familiarity that had been taken for granted has been lost, and it is easier to pinpoint it on language.

The fact that attrition is a lonely process triggered by (albeit selective) isolation is what serves to make it appear all the more authentic. This is something that you experience as an individual; not as a member of a community but as an ex-member, and it therefore is yours in a way that acquisition (which has to rely on interaction in one way or another) seldom is. I would propose that it is this fundamental authenticity which triggers the need for 'definitional authority', so to speak: 'I am the person who is experiencing this, therefore I can explain what it feels like.' And as descriptions and explanations that restrict themselves to language cannot convey the emotions associated with the overall process of estrangement, we reach for metaphors.

The problem with metaphors is that they are compelling. Once we have accepted an intuitive similarity between an aspect of two phenomena, we are apt to extend this to the overall thing. We may think, deduce and even observe within the perceptual cage to which we have confined ourselves.

Worse, even if we ourselves can avoid this trap, we have provided an easy template for newcomers to the field and to laypeople. The task of the scientist is to observe, describe and explain a phenomenon *in itself and for its own sake*, as de Saussure put it. Let us leave the metaphors to the poets and the salespeople.

Definitions of attrition

Attrition can be described in two ways, as a process or as a phenomenon. The definition of the process is deceptively simple: When we are looking at attrition, we are dealing with "the non-pathological decrease in a language that had previously been acquired by an individual" (Köpke & Schmid, 2004:5). In other words, attrition investigates the situation where a speaker (of an L1 or a later learned second or foreign language) can no longer do something which s/he had previously been able to do, and this loss of proficiency is not caused by a deterioration of the brain due to age, illness or injury, but by a change in linguistic behaviour due to a severance of the contact with the community in which the language is spoken. Given this definition there are two theoretically possible scenarios: one where *all* contact has ceased and there is no linguistic input or communication at all (as would be the case if someone was stranded alone on a desert island) and one where there is overwhelming competition from another language system (for L1 attrition, this situation applies in the case of emigrants, where attrition of a foreign language is concerned, this is the case after in-

struction or exposure to that language has all but ceased).

These two scenarios imply an interesting theoretical question: Is loss of proficiency caused by lack of exposure - does the knowledge system underlying language use need constant input, maintenance and refreshing in order to remain intact? - or is it competition from another system which causes problems? If an answer to this question could be found, it would have far-reaching implications for our understanding of linguistic knowledge as such. As it is impossible for obvious reasons to test scenario I empirically, researchers have to distinguish those factors in language loss which can be the result of crosslinguistic influence from those which cannot in order to find indications for one or the other.

Attrition is therefore a process of loss, of forgetting, of deterioration. This implies that there are two stages of linguistic knowledge: a pre-attrition stage A and an attrited stage B, and the apparent difference between A and B, caused by the *process* of attrition, is then the *phenomenon* of attrition. The latter is far more difficult to define: at what moment is it possible to claim that B is really different from A to the degree that makes the speaker an attriter? We know that bi- or multilinguals often experience cross-linguistic interference, but the question of how much of this is due to on-line (or, if you will, performance) problems as opposed to a difference in the underlying representation of knowledge (or competence) is anything but trivial. So, while we may be able to claim that a group of attriters *behaves* differently from a group of non-attriters, that they *do* something different, how can we determine if this difference in behaviour corresponds to a difference in linguistic knowledge?

Imagine the case of an L1 speaker of German who has emigrated to the United States at age 22 and is now 70. We meet this speaker in her home and initiate a conversation by inviting

her to tell us the story of her life. Our first impression is that, after 48 years of life in an L2 environment, her use of German is still fluent and idiomatic to a degree that might astonish us. We do notice occasional code-switches, and we notice that one context in which these are particularly frequent is where she tells us that she has recently developed a heart condition for which she is currently undergoing extensive treatment.

There are a great number of possible explanations for her use of L2 items here: for one thing, these terms are probably used quite frequently in our speaker's current situation, while the German equivalents may have been unused for decades, so the English terms are familiar and easy to activate although the German ones are by no means forgotten. Secondly, as the English terms are used every day by her and others to describe her individual and very personal situation, they may have acquired an intimate and emotional component which the more distant and therefore impersonal German words, which have only ever been used in reference to other people, lack. On the other hand, the opposite may equally well be the case: depending on the emotional role that L1 and L2 play for our speaker, she may use L2 terms to keep an emotional distance from a threatening situation. And lastly it is very possible that, because of the development of medical knowledge, the English equivalents the speaker knows may, for her, describe a conceptually very different condition than the German terms did at the time that she was exposed to them: their meaning might be frozen at the state of medical insight with which she has learned to associate them nearly 50 years ago. Of course it might even be the case that her particular condition is a recently discovered one for which no term existed at all at the time of her emigration - and as she can never have learned it, it would be ridiculous to claim that she had forgotten it.

Although the speaker in this (hypothetical) scenario clearly behaves in a way that a speaker who had not been exposed to an L2 to a similar degree would not, none of the explanations proposed above for this particular example invokes L1 attrition. The mere use of codeswitching or borrowing can therefore not necessarily be taken as an indication of attrition.

So what is? In order to determine whether the L1 vocabulary of the same speaker is intact overall, it is clearly not enough to investigate how often she uses L2 items. Her speech would have to be investigated in more depth for features such as lexical richness, hesitation phenomena etc., possibly through the application of more rigorously controlled tests. Similar caveats apply to other areas of her linguistic repertoire, such as grammar, phonology, pragmatics etc. However, one important question can probably never be answered: Are the differences which may exist between this speaker on the one hand and non-attriters on the other of a temporary or permanent nature? Any attempt made in a naturalistic setting, through testing speakers before and after re-exposure to their L1, is doomed to failure, as the intention of going back to the country of origin, temporarily or permanently, may in itself be enough to trigger re-activation of such knowledge as can be re-activated. Theoretically, a valid testing scenario would involve participants who have no such intention, in the vague hope that they will, at some point in the future, a) change their mind, b) let the investigator know about this and c) amidst the logistic problems and upheavals involved with returning home make the time for a re-testing session. And then, of course, one would expect them to do better on this re-testing anyway, due to what they learned during the first testing session.

We therefore cannot say whether differences we may observe between attriters and non-attriters are temporary

or permanent, in other words, whether the difficulties an attriter encounters are located only in how underlying knowledge is used, applied and maybe confused at the current point in time or whether this underlying knowledge itself has been permanently changed or restructured.

Circumstances

Another as yet unresolved question is what it is in the environment, habits, attitudes or personality of a speaker which causes attrition. Any large-scale study of attrition will uncover substantial variability between individual speakers in the degree of decomposition or maintenance of the linguistic system. Typically, some speakers preserve native-like competence over a very long attrition span, while others seem to attrite quite dramatically within a few years of emigrating. One of the phenomena that language attrition research aims to uncover is to what degree these differences can be explained on the basis of characteristics of the speaker and her environment.

The goal of sociolinguistic investigations of attrition is therefore to identify extralinguistic factors which can impact on the attritional process, and to determine the degree of their impact. Ideally, it should be possible to arrive at a state of knowledge where these factors can be used in a predictive fashion: If a person is about to emigrate, and if all their characteristics and circumstances are known, our knowledge should allow us to predict with a fair degree of accuracy the degree to which this person's L1 proficiency will have undergone attrition, say, ten years later.

Among the factors to be looked at in this respect are traditional sociolinguistic background variables such as gender, education and age. Secondly, it is wise to include factors which have been shown to be important in other

areas of bilingualism, such as age at onset as well as attitude and motivation. And lastly, there are factors which are specific to this particular area of investigation, such as the length of time elapsed since the onset of the attritional process and the amount of contact with and use of the L1 (for an overview of research into these factors see Köpke & Schmid 2004).

Furthermore, it has become evident from research on language attrition that even otherwise highly comparable speakers, who emigrated at the same age, have lived in emigration for roughly the same time span and have equal opportunities to use their L1, can vary dramatically as to the skill which they retain in their first language (e.g. Schmid 2002). The reasons for this variation probably lie in more subjective and emotional factors: Emigration is a highly disruptive event with far-reaching implications. In some cases migration may be experienced as a vastly positive occurrence, which brings more prestige and a better standard of living, while in others it is a last resort to escape persecution and violence, demanding huge personal and material sacrifices.

Whatever the situation, these circumstances will interact with the migrant's unique personality to bring about a particular outlook and a change in identity. A new start is always an opportunity to redefine oneself, although the range of options may be wider in some situations than in others. One limitation that almost all migrants experience to some degree is that migration makes you a foreigner, that is to say, an outsider. How an individual responds to that, whether s/he wants to shed that status as quickly as possible and 'blend in', or whether the feeling of difference is accepted and embraced, has been shown to play a large role towards predicting the success of the language acquisition process. We may reasonably expect that the same circumstances may also affect language attrition.

The role of second language acquisition for the construction of identity, particularly among migrants, has received much attention in recent decades. It has been demonstrated that the wish to belong to a certain group is often among the most important predictors of success in L2 acquisition (e.g. Pavlenko 2005): someone who has a deeply-felt love and admiration for Dutch society, and a desire to be as Dutch as possible, will probably eventually become better at speaking Dutch than someone who is perfectly comfortable with her present identity, who thinks that The Netherlands is a quaint little country filled with tulips, high tech and soft drugs, but has to learn some Dutch because she has to spend a couple of years in Rotterdam for her work.

The question of what happens to the first language of a bilingual speaker or a migrant is the other side of this coin, and we might expect that the factors which influence eventual success in foreign language learning may also have an impact on first language maintenance or attrition (e.g. Ben Rafael & Schmid 2007). The assumption would then be that a migrant who has a strong motivation to integrate into the host society will experience more attrition than someone who is comfortable with remaining a foreigner and somewhat of an outsider – all other things being equal. All other things, however, are seldom equal: Both in language acquisition and in language attrition, attitudes can interact with other factors in ways which are complex and difficult to predict.

There are a number of factors which will impact in different ways on the process of L1 attrition. Frequent use (interactive or receptive) of a particular language may help to maintain the native language system intact, and so may a positive attitude towards the language or the speech community. On the other hand, none of these factors may be enough in themselves, and not all exposure to the language may be

helpful. A small, loose-knit L1 social network may even have a detrimental effect and accelerate language change. Most importantly, however, the opportunity to use a language and the willingness to do so are factors which interact in complex ways to determine the process of language attrition. As yet, our understanding of this interaction is quite limited.

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