

First Language Attrition

Interdisciplinary perspectives
on methodological issues

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First Language Attrition

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on methodological issues

Edited by Monika S. Schmid, Barbara Köpke, Merel Keijzer
and Lina Weilemar

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For Bert Weltens

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Language attrition

The next phase

Barbara Köpke and Monika S. Schmid

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Introduction

The study of first language attrition is currently entering its third decade. However, after twenty years of diligent investigation resulting in numerous theoretical and empirical papers the questions on this topic still greatly outweigh the answers. Findings from individual studies seem to indicate that it cannot even be said with any certainty *whether* a first language in which a certain level of proficiency has been reached can ever undergo significant attrition, let alone *how* or *why* it might.

There are many reasons for this failure to arrive at a more integrated and explanatory framework. Some are theoretical, some methodological, and some are linked to communication or lack thereof between individual researchers. These were the problems that our conference, this volume, and subsequent work have been trying to address. A further problem is, of course, the extraordinary complexity and multi-facetedness of the phenomenon of language attrition. It is our belief, however, that this last issue cannot even begin to be tackled unless the first three have been solved.

This chapter will attempt to identify and clarify these issues, in order to establish the starting ground from which the individual papers will proceed. The first section will give a chronological overview of how the field of language attrition has developed over the past two decades, try to identify the concerns and forces that have shaped it, and point out developments and changes. The second section introduces those extralinguistic factors that have been shown to play important roles in attrition. The third section presents an overview of theoretical frameworks within which language attrition studies have been

conducted, while the fourth section focusses on questions of research design. The final section is an outline of the structure and contents of this volume.

1. A historical overview

The topic ‘language attrition’ seems to exercise a strange fascination. The question of whether an individual can really forget a first or second language once learned, and how and why this ‘loss’ might proceed, is an intriguing one. One could even go so far as to say that most people would intuitively describe themselves as ‘attriters’ – “I took Spanish in school for three years, but I’ve forgotten it all”. Especially fascinating are questions about the nature of memory and the possibility of reactivating a forgotten language system, e.g. under hypnosis. This fascination was also at the root of the beginning interest in language attrition in the early 1980s – Richard D. Lambert, one of the organisers of the ‘inaugural’ UPenn conference “The Loss of Language Skills”, and co-editor of the subsequent conference volume (Lambert & Freed 1982), describes his interest as “both personal and professional”. Having studied a variety of foreign languages, ranging from a number of standard Indo-European ones to Urdu, Bengali, Sanskrit and Marathi, and having achieved fluency in at least some of these, he found that his proficiency was decreasing through the course of the decades (Lambert p.c.).¹ Such reports of a feeling, based on introspection, of erosion in a first, second or foreign language seem very frequent among language attrition researchers. On the professional level, too, interest in language attrition often seems to have been initiated by experiences with FL students who had devoted a substantial amount of time trying to achieve proficiency which they subsequently lost:

To a considerable extent, the large amount of time spent learning an Indian language was wasted. And this problem was not limited to students of Indian languages, but was more widespread throughout the field of area studies. I had conducted two major national surveys of university-based language and area studies [...]. The survey showed that the problem of language skill loss was endemic to African, East European, Far East, Middle East, South Asian, and South East Asian studies as well. (Lambert, p.c.)

This observation, coupled with a paucity of published literature, motivated Lambert to organise a national stocktaking conference which “might turn up more information and perhaps help establish an area for future research in the field.” (p.c.) The study of language attrition was thus inaugurated in a very

teleological and conscious way, certainly a rather unusual procedure for a research topic. Unusual it might have been; effective it no doubt was. *The Loss of Language Skills* (Lambert & Freed 1982) was a benchmark publication that, two decades later, has lost none of its importance and relevance to current research. It not only covers the issue of (first and second) language loss from every conceivable perspective, taking into account issues such as language shift/death, pathological language loss, social and political factors, but it also contains, in a methodological section, the groundbreaking papers by Andersen, Oxford and Clark. Of these, Andersen's paper, in particular, is worthy of far more consideration than it has, so far, received in language attrition research, since it provides an outline of a set of preliminary assumptions and testable hypotheses and thus draws up a blueprint for research. Both the conference and the publication thus took it upon themselves to provide an emerging field with theoretical and methodological frameworks as well as background information from neighbouring disciplines.

At this point, the study of language loss research branched out across disciplines and countries. In the USA, the Language Skills Attrition Project (LSAP, see Ginsberg 1986) was founded in an attempt to compile an archive of foreign language attrition tests and data in the less commonly taught languages Chinese, Japanese and Arabic. The aim of this project was

(...) to measure the language competency at the end of their training of a cohort of students in the AOLC's [Advanced Overseas Language Centers, BK & MSS] in Cairo, Taipei, and Tokyo, then measuring their proficiency again at yearly intervals after their return to the United States. (Richard Lambert, p.c.)

The methodological problems involved in developing a roughly equivalent set of tests across these languages, investigating features that were assumed to be vulnerable to attrition, were immense. Unfortunately, very little has been published on how these tests were designed, and what the outcome of the pilot studies were (the only available reports are Lambert & Moore 1984, 1986). Lambert himself describes them as "not substantial enough to help much in the development of the new field of language skill attrition. Nor, unfortunately, were the students' competencies measured after a lapse of time as originally planned." (Richard Lambert, p.c.)

Meanwhile, the Pennsylvania conference had inspired interest in Europe, and specifically in The Netherlands. A personal link developed between Richard Lambert and Theo van Els, leading to the organisation of a two-day workshop with participants from the US and The Netherlands at Nijmegen University in October 1982. A number of European projects were thus set

in motion (van Els 1986:3). The ‘Dutch contingent’ introduced several new concepts to this developing field. Researchers had begun to feel that the micro-linguistic approach put forward so far was lacking in theoretical depth, and that language attrition had to be seen not merely as a linguistic but also as a cognitive process, and thus an integral component of language acquisition (Bert Weltens, p.c.). A further important consideration was that the research strategies and models which had, so far, been used in large-scale projects on language shift had to be incorporated into the typically small studies of individual loss. In other words, it was hypothesised that attrition could not be studied in isolation from its social context. It was via this angle of interest that questions about linguistic minorities, migrants, and the attitudes of the surrounding dominant society entered the field (Sjaak Kroon, p.c.).

These efforts eventually led to the *Language Loss Symposium* held in Kerkrade (near Maastricht, NL) in 1986. The proceedings of this conference (Weltens, de Bot & van Els 1986) are discernibly different from Lambert & Freed. Where the earlier volume had contained a collection of papers that were largely if not exclusively theoretical-methodological, the 1986 volume presents only a few methodological papers – which, furthermore, are clearly the outcome of preliminary reflections on a very specific research project to be undertaken – augmented by a number of reports on pilot studies or work in progress. The 1986 volume furthermore attempts to span the gap between language shift, dialect death and second language attrition, contributions on individual first language attrition still being notably absent.

These early years witnessed a mere handful of investigations of first language attrition which – in contrast to the studies that emerged from the dense network described above – were apparently conducted and published in relative isolation, such as Sharwood Smith (1983), Hiller-Foti (1985), Bettoni (1986) and Py (1986).

The next big surge in publications took place in 1989, when two journals devoted a special issue to language attrition: *Studies in Second Language Acquisition* 11:2 (ed. by Andrew Cohen & Bert Weltens) and *Review of Applied Linguistics (I.T.L.)* 83–84, comprising papers presented at the Language Loss Symposium held at the *World Congress of Applied Linguistics* at the University of Sydney, 1988. Both collections witness a further shift in balance from exclusively theoretical to applied papers and towards L1 attrition in an L2 environment. These two volumes are a good indication of the type of research that was being conducted at this time. Most papers are short preliminary, in-progress, or concluding summaries of projects, pilot studies or PhD-studies (some of these projects, unfortunately, were abandoned before completion).

The next, and – thus far – last collection of papers that explicitly limits itself to language attrition, in this case even narrowed down to L1 attrition, is Seliger & Vago (1991). This is the first collection that was not the outcome of some kind of meeting of researchers. The editors – both of whom had also become interested in the topic through personal experience – contacted potential contributors directly (Robert Vago, p.c.), which is a testimony to the fact that the field was beginning to establish itself. Rather interestingly, although this volume is the first collection of papers to proudly carry the term ‘attrition’ in its title, few of the reported studies actually deal with this phenomenon in the strict meaning of the term – the non-pathological decrease in proficiency in a language that had previously been acquired by an individual, i.e. intragenerational loss. Apart from a number of theoretical papers, Seliger & Vago contains several papers on language shift and death, as well as one on aphasia. In addition to that, there are five case studies on the attrition of one (in one case two) subjects, and only three larger studies – with between 6 and 30 subjects – are reported on.

This volume ushered in the nineties, a decade that witnessed the disciplines of L1 and L2 attrition drifting apart. L1 attrition, by and large, seemed to be content to be a subfield of the larger ‘Maintenance and Loss of Minority Languages’ area, on which a series of conferences were held in The Netherlands between 1988 and 1998 (see below). It is symptomatic that in 1998, Kees de Bot pointed out in exasperation – and doubtlessly not for the first time – that he and Bert Weltens were the two only ‘knights’ in pursuit of the shining goal of terminological distinction between *Shift* (intergenerational) and *Attrition* (intragenerational) as hyponyms of the more general *Loss*.² L2 attrition, on the other hand, became more and more firmly established within the field of foreign language teaching. This division in ‘affiliation’ impacted very heavily on the methods of data elicitation, testing, and analysis used by the two fields, which eventually made comparisons between individual studies virtually impossible.

The loss of close links was not, however, confined to the two branches of the discipline. The personal ties between most researchers working on the narrowly confined field of language attrition that had characterised and shaped the eighties also ‘attrited’. If we take Seliger & Vago to be the transitional point between the decades, it is very noticeable that hardly any of those names that had been so prolific in the eighties recur in the nineties (except, as e.g. in the case of Bert Weltens, as PhD supervisor – i.e. not themselves actively involved in research on the topic). The major exception is Kees de Bot, who can be de-

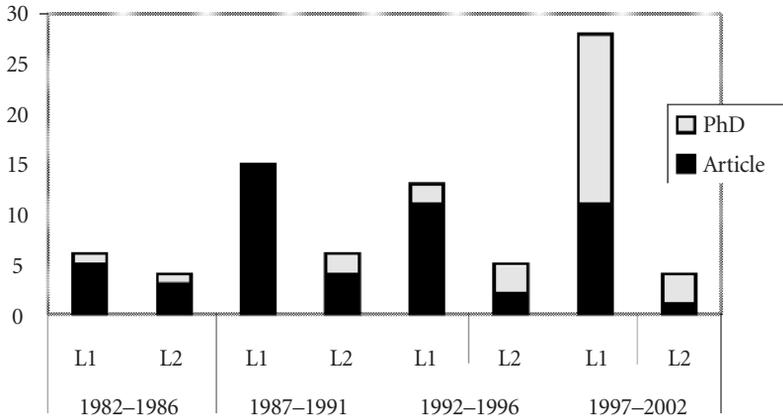


Figure 1. Types of studies published

scribed as the only constant in this quickly changing field – and the single force that held it together during the next decade.

Where L1 attrition is concerned, the nineties were the decade of large but solitary studies. While the eighties had posed interesting questions, a great proliferation of short papers hoping to find quick and easy answers, towards the end of the decade a sobering effect had set in, as researchers realised that it might all be far more messy than they had previously thought. On the other hand, a large enough body of theoretical work was now available to make the topic attractive for PhD studies. Figure 1 illustrates the development of articles and PhD dissertations in relation to each other.³

It is evident how the past decade, in particular the past five years, has witnessed an astonishing increase in dissertations while over the same span of time, the number of articles published has remained relatively stable (many of these latter publications, however, are exclusively theoretical treatises in handbooks or encyclopaedias). Language attrition research was thus characterised by the solitary existence of the PhD-student, spending a large part of her time doing fieldwork and, typically, having little opportunity and less money to go to conferences and make contacts in the international scientific community. Unfortunately, many of these PhD-dissertations are not easily available,⁴ which means that, while much work – and good work – was being done on language attrition in the 90s, many researchers could not draw on each other's work, and

the field lost most of the overall coherence and collective impetus it had begun to enjoy in the decade before. In addition to that, many researchers who were doing a PhD during this period abandoned the topic (if not the profession) after completing their dissertation.

It is hard to say whether this 'individualisation' of language attrition research was the cause or the outcome of the fact that the frequency of conferences or workshops specifically dedicated to language attrition also decreased sharply within this period. The political climate, which made it possible to obtain very generous funding for activities on language loss, necessitated the link between research on loss of indigenous and non-indigenous languages – upon which the field experienced what can only be called media hype. The first *International Conference on Maintenance and Loss of Minority Languages* (de Bot & Fase 1991), organised by researchers from the University of Tilburg in Noordwijkerhout (The Netherlands) was reported on in national and international TV programs and newspapers in 1988 (Kroon, p.c.). This great public interest diminished over the next decade, during which two more very successful conferences were held (in 1992 and 1998, see Fase, Jaspaert & Kroon 1995; Klatter-Folmer & van Avermaet 2001; Ammerlaan, Hulsen, Strating & Yağmur 2001). At all of these conferences, L1 attrition was also represented, but the focus on a diminishing proficiency across one lifespan that had commanded such interest in the decade before became fuzzier (see also the account of one of the organisers of the 3rd and thus far last such conference, Kutlay Yağmur, this volume).

It was only after the turn of the millennium that the field started to consolidate itself again. Workshops on L1 attrition were organised at international conferences – at the *Second Language Research Forum* 2000 in Madison, Wisconsin by Dorit Kaufman (see some of the papers in Bonch-Bruevich et al. 2001) and at the *3rd International Symposium on Bilingualism* in Bristol, 2001, by Agnes Bolonyai.

In this situation we felt that it would be beneficial to the field of L1 attrition studies to provide a platform for researchers to exchange their findings, reflect on methodological issues, and engage in an intensive discussion of theoretical and practical aspects of language attrition research, in order to try and re-establish something approximating the close network of the eighties.

The following sections will attempt to clarify some of the issues that we found especially in need of attention in such a network.

2. Some basic issues in attrition research

Researchers beginning work on language attrition often seem disconcerted that, contradicting all their intuitions on the ‘undoubted’ and unquestioned existence of the phenomenon we label attrition, twenty year’s work has not yet been able to turn up unambiguous answers. This, however, is hardly surprising. The question “Can people forget a language?” bears, at least in one respect, a close resemblance to the Ultimate Question of Life, the Universe and Everything invoked in Douglas Adams’ *Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*. Adams describes a race of “hyperintelligent pandimensional beings” who build a supercomputer whose task is to calculate the answer to this Ultimate Question – a task which takes the computer 7.5 million years to accomplish. Eventually, it comes up with the answer “Forty-Two”. The problem, as Adams points out, was that it had never been precisely specified what the question was in the first place. In the same way, the question “Can a speaker forget a language?” is imprecise, and therefore unanswerable as it stands, in various ways: there is, as yet, no workable and testable definition of language attrition – or of what would constitute evidence for its presence. However, the growing body of work provides converging evidence for at least some of the assumptions pertaining to what attrition might be, and how and why it might happen.

2.1 Extralinguistic aspects

Many attempts were made during the first and largely methodological decade to provide a precise terminological and taxonomical framework within which language attrition research could be conducted. The best-known (and most extensively quoted) of these is the division of the types of language attrition according to what language is lost (L1 or L2) and in what environment (L1 or L2) this loss takes place (first made by de Bot and Weltens 1985, but usually ascribed to van Els 1986).

This split results in four possible types of attrition (see Fig. 2), of which two – reversion and dialect loss – have received relatively marginal attention.⁵ This is understandable, since including these two areas under ‘attrition’ causes a variety of problems of methodology, terminology, and data analysis. Language reversion is very difficult if not impossible to separate from the kinds of linguistic problems that are also encountered in the monolingual elderly (see Goral 2004). Furthermore, the informants under analysis in this type of L2 attrition most often are migrants who have never received systematic instruction in their L2. The problem of the point of reference – what was the L2

Language lost	Linguistic environment	
	L1	L2
L1	Dialect loss	L1 attrition
L2	L2 attrition	Language reversion (in the elderly)

Figure 2. The ‘van Els taxonomy’

competence of the informant before psychosocial and/or neurolinguistic reasons connected with aging led to L2 attrition and reversion to the L1? – thus becomes impossible to deal with. The inclusion of dialect loss in a taxonomy of language attrition, too, causes many problems. Firstly, it has to be assumed that dialect loss typically is more similar to language shift than to attrition, i.e. it is something that happens inter- rather than intragenerationally due to incomplete acquisition (Kroon p.c.). Secondly, the distinction between an L1 and L2 environment seems, in this case, to hinge critically on the rather arbitrary and messy classification of whether two linguistic systems are two ‘different’ languages or ‘merely’ two different varieties of the same language.

Nevertheless, the four-way taxonomy is invoked in virtually every study on attrition – perhaps because it is such a clear milestone in the development of the field, and such a (seemingly) neat and discrete way of carving it up, rather than because of its actual long-term impact in establishing subfields of ‘attrition’. Given the overwhelming focus of language attrition studies on L1 attrition in an L2 environment and L2 attrition in an L1 environment (as well as the fact that the significance of the very distinction between these two has recently been called into question, see de Bot 2002), we would propose, with respect, that this taxonomy may have outlived its usefulness.

That notwithstanding, there are other methodological distinctions that are clearly necessary, if an overall picture of attrition is ever to be gained. These have not, so far, been clearly established or respected. The most obvious of these concerns the difference between language attrition in *children* – i.e. the attrition of a linguistic system which has not yet stabilised – vs. attrition in *adult* speakers. Clearly related to this is the distinction of attrition among simultaneous, early and late bilinguals. The results from previous studies indicate that it is necessary to take into account both *age at the onset of bilingualism* (see e.g. the findings in Montrul 2002) and *age at the onset of attrition*. There is converging evidence suggesting that an L1 system can indeed be eroded to a quite dramatic degree if the attrition process sets in well before puberty (e.g. Bode 1996; Isurin 2000a; Isurin 2000b; Kaufman & Aronoff 1991; Nicoladis & Grabois 2002;