Data collection, corpus-building and linguistic evidence in language attrition research

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Language attrition has been defined as the non pathological loss of a language by bilingual speakers. As such, it can be seen as a subfield of language contact, but it should be distinguished from other contact phenomena such as language change, shift, loss and death in bilingual communities. Language change, shift and death typically take place in bilingual communities across generations, whereas the term 'attrition' is used to refer to individual language loss (usually among migrants) and consequently takes place within one generation. Furthermore, 'attrition' can be defined as loss of the structural aspects of language, i.e. change or reduction in form, whilst 'shift' is a loss of functional aspects, i.e. the gradual replacement of one language by another with respect to language use.

Recent analyses show that the factors involved in attrition are highly complex due to an interplay of linguistic, cognitive and socio-psychological aspects which can only be addressed by multidisciplinary approaches:

- Linguistic dimension: attrition is selective, affecting specific language structures preferentially and it is consequently dependent upon the structural characteristics of the languages spoken by the immigrant. From a linguistic point of view, attrition research helps to complete evidence for language universals as given by studies in language acquisition and aphasia for example.

- Cognitive and neurobiological dimension: attrition cannot be isolated from general principles of human cognition such as maturational aspects (critical period for certain aspects of linguistic acquisition, the development of memory systems, aging effects in cognition), processing mechanisms (e.g. activation, inhibition) or general cognitive skills such as memory and attention.

- Sociological and sociolinguistic dimension: attrition is favoured by many factors, some of them linked to personal attitudes and beliefs, and some to the attitudes and opinions shared and voiced by the overall society (see above). The latter will differ from migrant community to migrant community, and be determined by demographic factors, public stereotypes and prejudices, institutional representation, to name but a few.

To sum up, what is known at this point is that there are particular linguistic, cognitive and socio-psychological conditions where attrition is more likely to occur than in

others. What is not yet known are the precise structural manifestations of attrition in a broad variety of languages and settings. Over the past years, great progress has been made in the area of theoretical interpretation and evaluation of the phenomena witnessed in language attrition. However, the impression prevails that a peak may have been reached in the progress that has been achieved on the theoretical level. One reason for this is that many of the questions and hypotheses put forward on this front are inherently comparative and crosslinguistic in nature: the research questions asked in language attrition studies typically concern phenomena that are highly dependent on characteristics of individual languages, whether typological or sociolinguistic, and it thus seems safe to assume that crosslinguistic investigations are necessary in order to find generalizable answers. However, since up to this point there is no single study that comparatively and quantitatively assesses the attrition of more than one language, the quest for answers seems doomed. The major impediments to attrition research thus consist of a) the monodisciplinary approach to theoretical explanation typically pursued by attrition studies, b) the fact that no study has taken a crosslinguistic, comparative approach and c) the lack of a valid and tested instrument of assessment. All three are necessary if further progress is to be made, and all three require co-operation, exchange and openness between researchers.

This talk will present the ongoing efforts to standardize research designs and build a multilingual resource and data archive for first language attrition research within an international and interdisciplinary network of researchers. The aims are to assess and re-evaluate the methodological and theoretical frameworks for first language attrition research, and to develop a widely applicable research design in order to provide a more unified and solid basis that subsequent studies can draw upon.

There are a number of theoretical and methodological problems which such a research design has to overcome. Typically, attrition studies 'borrow' their experimental designs from other areas of linguistic investigation (e.g. SLA, foreign language teaching, aphasia). This selection is usually based on the formal requirements of how the theoretically formulated hypothesis could be tested, but does not take into account the problem that the attrition situation might require a different approach. It has not been established whether the experiments which demonstrably test certain things in the areas of investigation from which they were borrowed actually test the same things in language attrition.

This presentation will discuss some of the problems concerned with the standardization of these data, with making them available to other researchers, and with how to design such experiments for maximal usefulness across a wide range of resaerch questions.