First language attrition: The effects of acculturation to the host culture

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Abstract

Language attrition studies have mainly focused on second language (L2) attrition (Bardovi-Harlig & Stringer, 2011; Gardner et al., 1987). It is only in the last three decades that attention has been paid to L1 attrition and this area of applied linguistics is now aiming at establishing a sound theoretical and developmental framework. Globalization and the massive transnational migrations of the last decade have raised awareness on the fragility of what is taken as our linguistic solid ground: our L1. However, most studies so far have focused either on specific grammatical performative differences between attriters and control groups or on the codeswitching habits among migrant populations (Dussias, 2004; Major & Baptista, 2007). In contrast, the present study offers a sociolinguistic perspective by which the participants’ level of acculturation to the host culture is taken into account when analyzing the performance of 20 English L1 attriters living in Catalonia against a mirror control group in England.

Participants, all university-level educated English speakers who have lived in Spain for at least 8 years, were administered a sociolinguistic questionnaire to measure their level of exposure to their L1 as well as their attitude towards their L1 and the L2. Also, they were administered three language tests: the first test consisted of a free speech story-telling test to analyze differences in discourse (lexical richness, syntactic complexity, hesitation patterns and code switching), the second test measured their lexical retrieval rate (implicit knowledge) and finally, the third test looked into lexical retrieval of specific words in specific contexts (explicit knowledge). The results are measured in terms of correlation analysis (using CLAN and SPSS) between the results of the linguistic tests and the participants’ sociolinguistic habits. In turn, the latter are compared to the results of the control group in order to identify which acculturation phenomena have greater influence over L1 attrition.
1. Introduction

Most cross-linguistic influence studies look at forward transfer or transfer linked to second language acquisition (Bardovi-Harlig & Stringer, 2011; Gardner et al., 1987). However, transfer can also be “lateral” (the influence of a second language on a third and vice versa) and reverse (the influence of a second language on one’s mother tongue).

A number of studies on reverse language transfer in adult immigrants (not heritage or third-generation immigrants) have highlighted the importance of the length of stay in order to detect CLI (Crosslinguistic Influence) (Laufer, 2003; Jarvis 2003; Schmid et al., 2004), the level of education (Schmid et al., 2004), and the level of language awareness (metalinguistic knowledge) participants have (Paradis, 2007).

To our knowledge, this is the first study that looks at the sociolinguistic effects of migration in participants with a language that, in spite of being a minority language, is highly prestigious in the host country. In principle, this should favour our participants’ continuous access to their L1 and hence help avoid reverse transfer.

The aim of this study is to observe whether reverse transfer occurs in spite of such high accessibility and language prestige. It also aims to identify the ways and degree in which it manifests.

2. Methodology

2.1. Participants

Due to the impossibility to carry out a longitudinal study that would allow us to compare and contrast the changes undergone by a group of attriters after a long period of migration, we looked for a group of attriters in Spain and mirrored it socio-demographically with a control group in the UK (cross-sectional study). This way, the language elicited from the control group should reflect what our group of attriters’ L1 would be like should they have not left their home country. The sociolinguistic characteristics of both groups were as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attriters (Spain)</th>
<th>Control Group (UK)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>15 Adults</td>
<td>20 Adults</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bilingual English speakers</td>
<td>Monolingual English speakers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Length of stay: At least 8 years</td>
<td>Never lived abroad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level of Studies: University Degree</td>
<td>Level of Studies: University Degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Profession: Not language teachers or translators</td>
<td>Profession: Not language teachers or translators</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In our study, we considered that having participants with a high level of education would help diffuse sociolectal and dialectal varieties making our final results more homogenous (Jarvis, 2003) and decided upon a minimum length of stay abroad of at least 8 years since reverse transfer effects have been reported after 3 years (Jarvis, 2003) but are highly dependent on the amount of contact with the L1. Since our participants belong to a high prestige, widely-available language group, we decided to extend the “length of stay variable” to 8 years. In the same way, we expected that low metalinguistic knowledge would elicit more natural and less premeditated linguistic results (Paradis, 2007).

2.2. Methodology

In order to examine the level of acculturation of our participants, we chose a mixed methodology that would allow us to build bridges between the quantitative linguistic results and the qualitative self-reported results.

With regards to the linguistic tests, we also wanted to observe implicit versus explicit knowledge and therefore, our participants were administered natural oral speech tests and written untimed tests.
For the story-telling tests, we used the Foster and Tavakoli (2011) cartoon stories. We chose a linear storyline to elicit simple and coordinated sentences (Picnic) and a second story in which two actions happen simultaneously (Young man) in order to elicit more complex subordinate structures.

The oral narratives were transcribed and coded using CHILDES. In order to check for significance between variables, independent-sample T-tests were used, and next bivariate correlations were run to explore any possible relationships among variables in the questionnaire and the participants' language gains.

For the C-Cloze Test we used Schmidt’s test (http://www.let.rug.nl/languageattrition/C-Test) since it had already been designed and tested for the English language with the aim to explore first language attrition. We would expect that the increase in difficulty in the 5 different paragraphs would show whether the lack of contact with more formal yet everyday linguistic contexts would have an impact on the attriters’ ability to retrieve lexicon.

The aim of the timed lexical retrieval test was two-fold. On the one hand, it aimed at quantifying the amount of tokens produced per minute on an everyday linguistic family: fruits. On the other hand, it aimed at looking at the distribution in which the different lexical items were mentioned, looking for Stylomeric differences in the production between the two groups that could be ascribed to cultural reasons (whether closer to the L1 or the L2).

Finally, the sociolinguistic questionnaire was adapted from Keijzer’s (2007). Some questions were modified to fit a Spanish sociolinguistic context and others updated due to technological advancements that have an impact on the attriters’ possibility to keep in touch with their L1. Informal interviews were carried out with some participants after they had taken the sociolinguistic questionnaire on some of the answers they had provided.

3. Results and interpretation

For the current study we focused on disfluency measures. The oral narratives elicited significant results in the pauses per minute in favour of the attriter group and approached significance also in favour of the attriter group in the repetitions and self-corrections per minute.

The results reported above with regards to pauses per minute ($t(34)=3.680, p=.003$) are in line with Schmid & Fägerster (2010), who report a higher level of pauses in the attriter group than in the control group. However, what makes our results different from the studies we are aware of is the level of accessibility and the attitude to their L1 (English) that participants enjoy in the host country. Therefore, we consider it remarkable to
observe that in spite of such high accessibility to their mother tongue, attriters show similar results to attriters whose
mother tongue is neither relevant in their macro social context nor so widely accessible.

We also found significance in the number of gerund subordinate clauses in favour of the control group (t(33)=-2.632, p= .008). In spite of the fact that both groups produce a similar amount of subordinate sentences, the type of
subordination proves to be different. In the cases where gerund subordinate clauses can be substituted by a when
subordinate clause or by a relative clause, the control group showed a preference for gerund subordinate clauses
while the attriter group showed a preference for longer when subordinate clauses. These results would be in line
with Bardovi-Harlig and Stringer (2010) who defended the idea that attriters would show a simplified version of
their L1. In this respect, Jarvis (2003) and Dussias (2003) also observed a degree of acceptance of L2 structures by
attriter groups.

The independent sample T-tests also showed that the repetitions per minute approached significance
(t(34)=1.971, p = .057 ).

No quantitative significance was found in the lexical retrieval test. However, Stylometric tests still need to be
conducted in order to observe whether the order of salience of the different items mentioned is closer to the attriters’
L2 or L1.

4. Limitations

The study at hand needs to increase the number of participants of each group to 30. Such figure guarantees that
the statistical results are generalizable, as results from groups of 30 participants “approach critical values for groups
whose sizes approach infinity” (Jarvis, 2003, 57). This increase would also help define results approaching
significance either way.

Some of the results from tests exposed in this paper, especially those looking into the sociobiographical profile of
participants, have not yet been correlated to linguistic variables due to time constraints.

Interrater reliability checks are still to be done with regards to the results obtained from the transcription of the
natural speech tests.

The group of attriters used to elicit the results hereby reported were not asked to take parallel tests in the L2. The
reason for this being so was the amount of tests our participants were asked to take and the length of time we were
already asking from them (about 2 hours). Mirroring our tests in the L2 could have resulted in a lower participant
rate. However, new participants will be tested on their L2 level in the natural speech tests, which will extend their
time of participation but not to the point of it being a problem.

Other areas of acculturation and crosslinguistic influence such as phonological, orthographic, semantic and
pragmatic transfer have not been looked at in this study due to the need to limit the scope of the study for practical
reasons.

5. Conclusion

Reverse transfer is present in attriters whose mother tongue is both prestigious in the L2 context and who have
high accessibility to their mother tongue. Such transfer is both at a superficial level (lexical) and at a structural level
(choice of subordination).

In order to link the above results to acculturation, the following steps are suggested:

Table 3. Future analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TEST</th>
<th>ACTION</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pauses</td>
<td>Look at their language-related distribution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lexical retrieval</td>
<td>Using Stylometry to link lexical distribution in production and CLI (Jarvis &amp; Pavlenko, 2007)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Gerund Subordinate Clauses: Look at the frequency of subordinate gerund clauses in a Catalan Corpus

C-Cloze Tests: Analysis of the for morphological transfer

Sociolinguistic Questionnaire: Grouping into acculturation categories (Schumann, 1976) and analysis of the results obtained

With regards to the groups under study, data from a new attriter group with the same sociobiographical characteristics but with metalinguistic knowledge will be collected. The aim is to observe whether language awareness makes a difference in the level and nature of language transfer and whether this group’s results are closer to the first group of attriters without metalinguistic knowledge hereby analysed, or whether they fall closer to the control group. Such results could raise questions with regards to the role of metalinguistic knowledge in reverse transfer and also, with regards to “nativeness” as a construct.

References


