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First language loss; why should we care?

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Abstract

My research point is derived from my own language experience. I was a Turkish immigrant, born in Germany. Although I was a German-Turkish speaking bilingual, I completely forgot German at the age of seven when as a family we moved back to Turkey. Therefore, this paper researches the reasons behind first language loss, and whether there is a way to reactivate a forgotten language. It will discuss under what circumstances first language loss may occur, and how language loss can negatively affect not only the individual's life, but also the society that one lives in. Finally, I will provide I will provide recommendations for language protection.

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1. Introduction

Language loss (Language Attrition) is a multi dimensional phenomenon that has been searched from variety of perspectives such as neurolinguistics, psycholinguistics and sociolinguistics (Seliger& Vago, 1991). Language loss has been studied in diverse populations including bilingual and multilingual speakers, healthy aging, aphasia, dementia (Goral, 2003), and also is related to a variety of subjects including acculturation, assimilation, anomie and language death (extinction). First and second language attrition, not only covers the issue of language loss from different perspectives like age, motivation and attitudes, but also can be analyzed from the linguistic and theoretical aspects of language. This paper will discuss first language loss particularly from sociolinguistic perspectives including acculturation, assimilation, anomie, and extinction. In addition, different levels of attrition will be discussed. Finally, recommendations for language protection will be provided.

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2. Sociolinguistics Aspects of Attrition

2.1 Acculturation

Acculturation is one of the factors of first language loss. Acculturation is L2 learner's acquiring the culture of the

target language speaking society in order to acquire the mastery of L2 (Brown, 1980). Researchers like Schuman(1975) and Brown (1980) claim that if L2 learners experience the stages of acculturation gradually, through expressing their feelings of alienation, anomie or social distance, they will be able to master L2. Therefore, the learners will find their place in the L2 culture. Brown (1980) argues, L2 learners should internalize all four steps of period of excitement, culture shock, culture stress and full recovery, one by one to acquire the target language. What Brown means by full recovery is expressed by Shuman (1975) as, “The learner’s ability to partially and temporarily giving up his separateness of identity from the speaker’s of the target language and to incorporate a new identity so essential to bilingualism” (p.231). Therefore, as acculturation enhances proficiency in L2 learning, it may result in losing one’s L1, as well as L1 identity. On the contrary, according to Norton (1998), “Theories of acculturation in the field of SLA could have the presumably unintended and undesirable consequence of promoting subtractive bilingualism in children” (p.443). Her perspective is, L2 learners can keep both their own identity and L1 language, and acquire L2 identity and language to exchange information with the target language speakers. Norton claims, the concept of investment rather than motivation reflects a healthier socially and historically built relationship between TL speaking society and the L2 learner (p.444). She conducts a research on two immigrants, Katrina and Mai and searches for the reasons why additive bilingualism takes place in Katrina’s life whereas Mai undergoes subtractive bilingualism. Thus, Norton questions Shuman’s theory of acculturation since, although Katrina and her family resist acculturation, they are able to keep both their native language alive, become fluent speakers of L2, and integrate to the TL culture. On the contrary, Mia and her family encountered acculturation lost their L1, but become effective users of L2. However, they could not integrate in the TL speaking society. The example illustrates that assimilation is not mandatory for integration; one does not have to lose one’s ties with one’s own culture and community that makes one unique and whole.

2.2 Assimilation

However, Shuman’s (1975) view regarding “learner’s preference for his own culture over that of the target culture or vice versa can effect success in language learning”(p.210) leads us to look at SLA from a different perspective : *Multiculturalism* or *Assimilation* for gaining success in L2 learning. Lambert & Taylor (1988) conducts a research about , “How immigrants as well as established minority groups in the U.S. can ...accommodate to the mainstream society and be accommodated by it”(p.73). In regard to Immigrant adjustment and integration to TL community, there are two emphasized ideologies: *Assimilation* which is the belief that minorities should give up their own cultural heritage and identities to adjust the TL community, or *Multiculturalism* is the view that these minority groups should maintain their heritage cultures and identities as much as possible. Lambert & Taylor’s (1998) research reveals that minority immigrant populations would like to keep their own cultures and languages, but also would like to be proficient in their L2 because they see L2 as a tool to enhance their career, and economic development. Throughout their research it is found out that, particularly, the Arabic minority population is able to both maintain their own language, and speak advanced level of English. Surprisingly, they maintained to keep their native language alive for three generations without any sign of L1 attrition. The constant use of L1 within the family, as well as the Arabic classes the children take at school, and the positive attitudes of the TL community toward the minority groups, and vice versa assist them to overcome their feelings of anomie, and construct a healthy relationship between their own culture, and the target culture without exposing to first language loss.

2.3 Anomie

On the other hand, According to Schuman (1975), anomie, dissatisfaction and alienation can enhance L2 learning (Schuman 1975). Scoon’s (2012) argument opposes to Shuman’s view. Scoon searches L2 language learning difficulties of 138 Native American students who do poorly in their English classes. She proves that because of the feeling that their culture is suppressed by American culture, students feel themselves isolated from the TL culture and also feel alienated toward their own culture and language. Scoon’s research contradicts to Schuman’s view, since her findings illustrate that, the feeling of alienation towards the dominant culture shows itself as a resistance to learn the dominant culture’s language. Nevertheless, Feuer (2007), in her narrative of personal growth, explains how the feelings of anomie caused her to feel alienated and isolated towards her L1 and L2. In order to overcome her feelings of anomie, she chooses to become a linguist and teacher of her L1 (Hebrew). It is clear that, her anomie does not hinder her success in L2, or resulted as losing her L1 but inversely anomic feelings promotes her to recognize her position and between the two languages, Hebrew and English. As a result, she loses neither of the languages. To conclude, TL culture’s attitudes towards the L2 learner as well as the L2 learner’s attitudes towards it may change the role of anomie in language learning and language loss. Anomic feelings can turn into a positive stimulator in people to question their identity and enable them to accept both identities without losing their L1 and culture.

2.4 Extinction

In spite of the aforementioned truths, some linguists give the impression that L1 speakers of other languages have to give up their heritage language and culture with their own will for being effective users of L2 (English) (Mufwene, 2005). He points out the misconceptions of globalization, and its effects on language loss. According to Mufwene, globalization should be a means that brings all languages together by enabling exchange between older and distant languages, but not separating and causing one language to be superior to others that may lead to *Atrhrophy*. He argues, L1 language loss, and being under the danger of extinction is not so easy since British colonization could not be able to wipe out the first languages of many African nations. Similarly, Dastgoshadeh & Jalilzadeh (2011), argue that language is dynamic and depends on time and space, and the change in languages is inevitable in today's Global world. However, it does not mean that acquiring an international language (IL) should cause complete assimilation that result in language loss. And, they support the idea that learning an IL is essential to improve international communication to provide equality and empower social economic and political relations between two cultures by keeping cultural values and language alive.

Dastgoshadeh & Jalilzadeh's and Mufwene's point of views can be observed as idealistic but also utopic and unrealistic. Since, Austin (2006) in his lecture reveals that in the 21st century the percentage of extinction of minority languages severely increased due to the emergence of monolingual ideologies, global communications and interconnections. He describes the stages of language extinction from viable to endangered, and from endangered to moribund, and finally, from moribund to extinct. In experiencing these stages, the speakers shift to the position of fluent to semi-speakers and in the end rememberers. At the semi-speaker stage people may even do not realize that their language is at the verge of extinction. For instance, Schmidt's (1991) research regarding two endangered languages Bouma Fijan and Dyribal spoken by Aborigines in Australia, portrays that semi-speakers of the Dyribal perceive their language as healthy and unthreatened. However, in time Dyribal has already left its place to the perceived more prestigious English gradually, and language loss has occurred first in communication, however later has been observed in identity.

When languages are losing their viability, it is not easy to regenerate their functionality, no matter how hard the governments and people try. The situation can be observed in New Zealand's natives Maori, after living 200 years under English colonization, today, very small amount of people can speak their L1, Maori fluently (Spolsky, 2003). Despite the efforts of the government programs including the acceptance of Maori as an official language, and establishing new curriculum at schools for revitalizing the language, the results are too far from reaching the targeted regeneration rate (Spolsky, 2003). Why is it so difficult to regenerate a forgotten L1? And are forgotten languages completely lost? For understanding these issues, we should analyze how attrition occurs. Also, we should see the phenomena from diverse perspectives since language attrition does not occur only within colonized or immigrated populations. It may also take place with adoptees (mainly adopted before CPH) and bilinguals (the parents could come from different cultures). Numerous researches exist in regard to two areas.

3. Attrition in adults and bilinguals

Pallier (2003) and Browsers at al. (2009) conduct researches regarding L1 attrition in adopted adults. According to Pallier's (2003) research that he conducted on Korean adoptees who were adopted by French families before CPH, the adoptees' brain activations were the same when they hear their forgotten L1 (Korean) and another unlearned language. He concludes that when L1 is learned before the CPH and is not used, the brain cannot identify it. Although, the results of the test illustrate that their L1 is completely forgotten, it does not mean that L1 cannot be reactivated. Browsers at al. (2009) in their research prove that forgotten languages can be reactivated before the age of 40 more easily than learning a new language even though the exposure to the childhood language is completely blocked. Also, Bylund (2009) shares the same view with Browsers at al. that reactivation of the certain aspects of L1 is possible by retraining the attriter. By now, attrition is perceived as a total language loss, however, attrition in most cases is not a complete loss of language, but a shift towards L2 in various aspects of linguistics, structural syntactic and phonological systems (Gurel, 2004). Bylund (2009) shares Gurel's claim by stating that language loss is selective and selective attrition affects different subsystems of language domains. Goral (2004) agrees with the same idea by explaining that through language attrition, different linguistic components of language can disappear. Knowing the lost components of the L1 attriter may help the language teacher to assist the attriter for reactivation. Also, researches study the subject of attrition in the elderly to understand the phenomena. de Bot & Clyne (1989) examine attrition, in elderly Dutch immigrants whereas Goral (2004) searches attrition in monolingual, healthy aging adults. Interestingly, de Bot & Clyne (1989) observe reverse attrition in some of the elderly immigrants. They search the reasons why elderly immigrants' fluency in L1 increases while their L2 dramatically decreases after the age of 65. They find out that Language reversion of the elderly occurs because they have learnt English before they reach the critical threshold level. On the other hand, According to Goral's (2004) findings, elderly monolingual immigrants share the

same compensation strategies with bilinguals along with L1 attrition which are Interlingual and intralingual strategies that include code switching, lexical borrowing, deliberate long answer, avoidance and are universal (Turian & Altenberg, 1991) . Both de Bot's and Goral's findings can help both research areas, attrition in elderly and bilinguals, to benefit from each other

4. Conclusion

First Language loss (L1attrition) is observed in many areas, from acculturation to extinction, as well as in many age groups in various levels. The reasons and the effects of attrition have been analyzed by many scholars. All findings are valuable since they explain the phenomena from diverse perspectives, and lead researchers to conduct new ones with the guidance of the previous findings. In this respect, any research cannot be regarded as more important than the other. However, the findings should serve a significant purpose: to prevent the languages from becoming extinct, and protect the identities and cultures of minority populations that are neglected due to language imperialism. To accomplish the mentioned purposes: Governments can establish partial immersion or cultural heritage programs. Communities can be educated against hostile and racist attitudes. Parents' consciousness should be raised towards the significance of gaining L2 proficiency as well as keeping their L1 identities, and cultural values to have a unique voice in the multicultural society they are exposed to. Most importantly, L2 teachers can promote additive bilingualism over subtractive, multiculturalism over assimilation in their classrooms by providing multicultural students' a welcoming environment, and helping them in expressing and overcoming their feelings of anomie, acculturation and assimilation. When the distinction between others and us, domineering and dominated, and occident and orient disappear (Priven 2008), people can take place in a literally global world by bringing their diverse perspectives, unique languages, and identities together.

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