John Benjamins Publishing Company

This is a contribution from Linguistic Approaches to Bilingualism 7:6
© 2017. John Benjamins Publishing Company

This electronic file may not be altered in any way.

The author(s) of this article is/are permitted to use this PDF file to generate printed copies to be used by way of offprints, for their personal use only.

Permission is granted by the publishers to post this file on a closed server which is accessible only to members (students and faculty) of the author's/s' institute. It is not permitted to post this PDF on the internet, or to share it on sites such as Mendeley, ResearchGate, Academia.edu.

Please see our rights policy on <https://benjamins.com/content/customers/rights>

For any other use of this material prior written permission should be obtained from the publishers or through the Copyright Clearance Center (for USA: www.copyright.com).

Please contact rights@benjamins.nl or consult our website: www.benjamins.com

Problematising the scope of language attrition from the perspective of bilingual returnees

Cristina Flores

Universidade do Minho

Schmid and Köpke (2017; henceforth S&K) propose a unified view of the term ‘language attrition’, which is supposed to integrate any effect of bilingualism visible in the native language of a bilingual speaker. With this new interpretation, the term now comprises a wide range of phenomena that have been exhaustively described in research on bilingualism, but not under the scope of ‘language attrition’. These include, among others, code-switching, lexical interferences and differences compared to monolingual speakers at the level of language processing. The term also includes those processes of individual language development that have been studied under the umbrella of language attrition, i.e., the processes of dismantling and deterioration of previously acquired knowledge. Despite multiple definitions of ‘attrition’, research on bilingualism relies on the common assumption that certain phenomena of bilingual language competence are the consequence of “‘normal’ processes of crosslinguistic interference” (S&K, 2017, p. 659, last point), whereas others are “abnormal” (same paragraph). The focus of attrition research has traditionally encompassed the latter ones, which reveal deteriorated or lost knowledge of the bilingual attriter. In this short commentary, I defend the position that the field still needs to separate these processes of deterioration from the range of other phenomena that characterize bilingual speech.

S&K intend to challenge the traditional view that distinguish normal effects of language interaction from effects of language erosion, based on the idea that the mere co-existence of more than one language in the brain leads to language attrition. From this assumption the strong statement follows that “every bilingual is an L1 attriter” (p. 641, last sentence of Section 2). Notwithstanding this broad understanding of language attrition, the authors seem to narrow their argumentation to sequential bilingualism by defining L1 attrition as the process by which “pre-existing linguistic knowledge becomes less accessible or is modified to some extent as a result of the acquisition of a new language” (p. 638, 1st paragraph). Thus, according to this view, language attrition is always the result of the presence

of another language. More precisely, it sets in when the acquisition of the other language begins.

This definition puts aside a very important part of bilingual populations: those who have acquired two native languages, i.e., early bilinguals who have been exposed to more than one language since the early stages of development. I believe that these are precisely the speakers who may pose challenges to S&K's unified approach to language attrition phenomena (see also Kupisch, Bayram & Rothman, 2017). Contradicting the concluding remarks of the authors, I believe that research on adult early bilingual speakers may, indeed, confirm that there is such a thing as 'complete development' in many domains of native language knowledge, and that this knowledge does not change when the speaker has uninterrupted contact with both his/her languages during his/her lifespan. This implies that the interaction between the two linguistic systems and the continuous co-activation of both languages do not necessarily lead to differences between bilingual and monolingual speakers, which may be interpreted as effects of language attrition. Studies on early bilinguals further show that there is actually a relevant difference between processes of interaction between two linguistic systems that are 'normal' outcomes of bilingualism, such as slower processing mechanisms, lexical borrowing and code-switching, versus processes of deterioration of native language knowledge, caused by prolonged disuse of the target language.

A large part of early bilinguals are heritage speakers, i.e., minority language speakers who acquire two languages almost simultaneously, i.e., the heritage language within the family since birth, and the majority language mainly through interactions outside the home (e.g., kindergarten). Even though from a strict chronological perspective, the majority language is often classified as early second language (e.g., Montrul, 2008), because increasing exposure to this language may happen around age three, it is in fact a second native language (2L1) according to the widespread assumption that the onset of exposure to a language until the age of three equals native language acquisition (McLaughlin, 1978). Bilingual speakers who are regularly exposed to two languages from very early on and continue to have uninterrupted contact with both languages until at least adolescence develop two independent native languages. It has also been shown that there are interactions of the two (or more) linguistic systems during the process of bilingual first language acquisition in the form of cross-linguistic influence (Serratrice, 2013). There is also some consensus among researchers that these interactions may lead to delays and divergent linguistic knowledge if exposure to one language is reduced (Montrul, 2013), but clearly not all heritage speakers are affected.

If we transfer S&K's proposal to this population of early bilinguals, these interactions, commonly referred to as effects of CLI, would be described as outcomes of language attrition. This claim challenges one basic idea of the process of language

attrition, namely that “in order to determine the effects of attrition, it is essential to ascertain what speakers knew when the attrition process began, since by definition attrition can only affect what was within the speaker’s knowledge” (Sorace, 2004, p. 143). By ascribing any kind of interaction between two linguistic systems within the bilingual’s mind to language attrition, the idea that attrition refers to erosion of previously acquired knowledge has been given up. According to S&K, this distinction is not needed since there is a continuum of acquisition and attrition processes that cannot be delineated. My claim is that there are indeed crucial differences between interactions of two linguistic systems. Some are the outcome of the parallel acquisition of two languages; others are effects of dismantling of knowledge that had been acquired before a change occurred in the speakers’ linguistic environment.

I would like to highlight these differences with results of my own research on language attrition in Portuguese-German bilingual speakers who acquired German and Portuguese as native languages in Germany or in Switzerland and later moved to Portugal (Flores, 2010, 2012, 2015). These studies demonstrate that, when they enter school at the age of 6/7 years, second-generation children from Portuguese families have acquired native-like knowledge of German in linguistic domains such as word order (e.g., verb placement) or verbal and nominal morphology (e.g., gender and number inflection). This is also shown by other studies that analyze language acquisition of child L2 learners of German (e.g., Rothweiler, 2006). They do not differ from monolingual speakers of German in their knowledge, for instance, of verb second or subject-verb agreement. If these children continue to live in Germany, no changes to this knowledge are expected. Therefore it does not seem problematic to consider these domains to be ‘completely developed’ at a certain age. In these domains, bilingual speakers do not differ from their monolingual peers.

What the above-mentioned studies on bilingual returnees have further shown is that this knowledge may in fact change if the bilingual speaker loses regular contact with one language, particularly if this loss of contact happens before the age of 11/12 years. The case study described in Flores (2015), for instance, demonstrates that, one year after moving to Portugal, Ana, a bilingual returnee child, started to produce ungrammatical verb-third sentences and replaced the dative case by the nominative or accusative case, i.e., she showed divergence in domains that she had fully mastered before she moved to Portugal. After thirteen months of living in Portugal without exposure to German, she started to produce ungrammatical sentences like (1):

- (1) Dann der Hund ist Krankenhaus für Tiere.
 then the dog is hospital for animals
 ‘Then the dog is in the animals’ hospital.’ (Flores, 2015, p. 577)

What I would like to highlight is that this performance is the outcome of interrupted contact with German and does not occur in cases of continued use of both native languages. Similar cases of dismantling of native knowledge that had been acquired before the onset of attrition are found in other returnee populations and in international adoptees (Kuhberg, 1992; Olshtain, 1986; Pallier et al., 2003). Therefore, even assuming that «the same processes and principles which drive and guide the acquisition of a language will also come to bear, in similar ways, on linguistic knowledge that has already been developed» (p. 660, last paragraph), I believe that it is crucial for research on language development to continue to separate phenomena of deterioration due to language disuse from phenomena of cross-linguistic influence which result from daily interaction of two systems. If the term “language attrition” is used with the broad meaning proposed by S&K, I suggest the use of a different term specifically for those phenomena of disintegration of knowledge which are observed in cases of lack of contact with one language and which do not occur in bilinguals who use both of their languages on a frequent basis.

References

- Flores, C. (2010). The effect of age on language attrition: Evidences from bilingual returnees. *Bilingualism. Language and Cognition*, 13(4), 533–546.
- Flores, C. (2012). Differential effects of language attrition in the domains of verb placement and object expression. *Bilingualism. Language and Cognition*, 15(3), 550–567.
- Flores, C. (2015). Losing a language in childhood: a longitudinal case study on language attrition. *Journal of Child Language*, 42(3), 562–590.
- Kuhberg, H. (1992). Longitudinal L2-attrition versus L2-acquisition in three Turkish children – empirical findings. *Second Language Research*, 8(2), 138–154.
- Kupisch, T., Bayram, F., & Rothman, J. (2017). Terminology matters II! Early bilinguals show cross-linguistic influence but are not attriters. *Linguistic Approaches to Bilingualism*.
- McLaughlin, B. (1978). *Second language acquisition in childhood*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Montrul, S. (2008). *Incomplete Acquisition in Bilingualism. Re-examining the Age Factor*. [Series on Studies in Bilingualism] Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Montrul, S. (2013). How native are heritage speakers? A look at gender agreement in Spanish. *The Heritage Language Journal*, 10(2), 15–39.
- Olshtain, E. (1986). The attrition of English as a second language with speakers of Hebrew. In B. Weltens, K. de Bot & T. J. M. van Els (Eds.), *Language attrition in progress* (pp. 187–204). Dordrecht: Foris.
- Pallier, C., Dehaene, S., Poline, JP., LeBihan, D., Argenti, AM., Dupoux, E., & Mehler, J. (2003). Brain imaging of language plasticity in adopted adults: can a second language replace the first? *Cerebral Cortex*, 13(2), 155–161.

- Rothweiler, M. (2006). The acquisition of V2 and subordinate clauses in early successive acquisition of German. In C. Lleó (Ed.), *Interfaces in Multilingualism: Acquisition, Representation and Processing* (pp. 91–113). Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Schmid, M., & Köpke, B. (2017). The relevance of first language attrition to theories of bilingual development. *Linguistic Approaches to Bilingualism*, 7(6), 637–667.
- Serratrice, L. (2013). Cross-linguistic influence in bilingual development: Determinants and mechanisms. *Linguistic Approaches to Bilingualism*, 3(1), 3–25.
- Sorace, A. (2004). Native language attrition and developmental instability at the syntax – discourse interface: data, interpretations and methods. *Bilingualism: Language and Cognition* 7, 143–145.

Author's address

Cristina Flores
 Departamento de Estudos Germanísticos e Eslavos
 Universidade do Minho
 Campus de Gualtar
 4710 – 057 Braga
 Portugal
 cflores@ilch.uminho.pt