Language Attrition: Measuring How “Wobbly” People Become in their L1

1 The importance of measuring attrition

Interest in language loss or attrition as an individual, non-pathological phenomenon has increased recently among linguists and educators, partly because of modern mobility and dislocation of people outside of their language community and partly because of the huge investments being made in multilingualism, especially in the EU. Although the phenomenon of “use it or lose it” is familiar to almost anyone who tries to speak a language they have not used since their schooldays, first language attrition is also a significant issue for professionals such as language teachers, translators, and interpreters, who are expected to maintain and produce natural, exemplary language while living in a different language environment.

Determining what aspects of language are most subject to attrition and measuring the degree of loss are serious challenges that must be addressed before compensation strategies can be recommended to such professionals. A meta-analysis of recent empirical research provides a methodological framework for investigating language attrition, which can be applied to various languages and settings. In addition, the results from a study of native English speakers living in German-speaking Switzerland suggest metalinguistic awareness can provide a degree of protection from certain types of attrition.

1.1 Definitions and challenges in measuring attrition

The first question to be addressed in measuring language attrition is what it actually is. Most people are familiar with the non-pathological (i.e. not due to the aging processes, stroke, or dementia) phenomenon of losing the abil-

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1 This description of attrition is taken from Ammedaan (1996).
ity to use a foreign language once learned at school; the object of interest here is the loss of the first language (L1). Anderson (1982: 91), at the beginning of concerted interest in this area, defined non-pathological language attrition as:

An LA's [language attritor's] use of language X will be significantly restricted in comparison with an LC's [linguistically competent individual's] use of the same language and the LA's earlier use of language X when he was an LC (if he indeed was an LC at one time). [...] An LA will exhibit (through self-report, ethnographic study, etc.) a lack of adherence to the linguistic norm adhered to by an LC, both speakers of the same language X.

The key terms that can be isolated from this definition are “restricted” (i.e. in the sense of where and when the language is used and/or in the sense of limits to the range of lexis and structures) and “lack of adherence” to norms. In his definition, Anderson pointed out that an important assumption in measuring attrition is the baseline linguistic competence of the potential attriter (i.e. “if he indeed was an LC at one time”) and defined the basis for the comparison as being other linguistically competent individuals (i.e. non-attriters).

With respect to the L1, Seliger and Vago (1991: 3) define language attrition with the metaphor “[...] unravelling of native language abilities”, which suggests the untangling of a complicated knot of interconnections. Rather than actual loss of structures or words, L1 attrition can also be viewed as various aspects of the foundation of language crumbling or falling apart (as suggested by the cover of Seliger and Vago’s book). Other researchers of L1 attrition (e.g. Bot 1998; Pavalenko 2004; Porte 2003; Schmid 2007; Schmid/Bot 2006; Schmid et al. 2004) generally define L1 attrition as a decline in linguistic skills. It affects many, if not all, L1 speakers who have lived for an extended period of time away from their L1 environment. A large body of research has documented the potential variables influencing L1 attrition, which include acquisition of the surrounding language, exposure to non-native speakers’ productions, attitudes to the surrounding language as well as attritors’ proficiency in and use of other languages.

The challenges in measuring attrition concern whose language to measure, what to measure, and how to measure it. Attriters tend to form heterogeneous groups with respect to dialects, age, socioeconomic class, and education. Although diversity is also an issue for many other areas of linguistic research, L1 attrition research is limited to people who no longer live in their first language community – hardly a homogeneous group, since people leave their countries for a multitude of reasons.

Age at departure, length of time away, and patterns of language use can all vary among attritors. Most attrition researchers (see Schmid 2004a for an overview) focus on people who leave their home country post-puberty and set a minimum length of time away (at least 5 years, as many as 15 years) to control for this factor. The measure of length of time away is relatively straightforward, but a problem with setting a minimum length of time is that the higher it is, the older the informants are, with age effects potentially confounding attrition effects. The measure of language use is much more difficult to quantify because it is usually very subjective (e.g. what does it mean to speak a language “frequently”?).

Establishing the basis for comparison by measuring a control or reference group’s performance is crucial in language attrition research. Usually the norm is defined as the language used by a group of native speakers matched to attriters in terms of age, dialect, educational background, etc. who are living in a country where the language is spoken. The question of whether reference group members should also be matched for linguistic ability in other languages has been raised (e.g. Schmid/Köpke 2009) but not yet answered. A complication with respect to this matching convention is language change. Since language change is a natural process that continues while people are away from their language community, it is challenging to distinguish individual attrition from older variants that have not gone through the same evolution as the variant in the home country.

Most people living away from their native language community learn at least one other language and probably use expressions from that language to express new concepts, etc. Such cross-linguistic influence (also referred to as transfer; cf. Odlin 1989) may or may not be evidence of language attrition (cf. Jarvis/Pavalenko 2008; Schmid/Köpke 2009; Sharwood Smith 1989). The bilingual or multilingual brain might restructure linguistic knowledge (cf. Herdina/Jessner 2002; Jessner 1999; Pavalenko 2009) in ways which may or may not involve loss. Differences in linguistic processing and judgements between potential attriters and monolingual non-attriters may be due to the former’s competence in more than one language and not necessarily to attrition of the first language.
Finally, one of the main difficulties in measuring attrition relates to the challenge of determining language competence despite performance slips. A question raised by many researchers is whether linguistic knowledge, especially of our about one’s native language, can actually be lost or whether it is simply harder to access under certain conditions. If the latter is true, then testing for language attrition can itself reactivate knowledge. Although people who are aware that language is the focus of study may avoid trying to access infrequent items or avoid complex, less frequent structures in spontaneous speech, being presented with infrequent structures may trigger recognition.

1.2 Measuring L1 attrition in L2 settings

Despite the numerous challenges in measuring L1 attrition, more attention has been directed to it in the last two decades. The native language that has been studied in the most detail so far is German. One reason for this is probably that large groups of German speakers immigrated at about the same time to the United States (cf. Altenberg 1991; Schmid 2002, 2004b), Australia (cf. Wans 1996, 1997), and Canada (cf. Schmid 2007; Prokop 2008). A question that is particularly acute with German speakers who emigrated around the time of WWII is when non-pathological loss through disuse becomes pathological loss because of aging effects. Attitudes to the native language and issues of identity have been tied to attrition in this group. More recent German-speaking immigrants in Ireland (Opitz 2004) and the Netherlands (Prescher 2007; Schmid 2007) have also been studied. The following linguistic areas have been examined for attrition of L1 German: lexical access and richness, inflectional morphology, and word order.

Depending on the individual researcher’s background and theoretical interest, L1 speakers of languages such as Dutch, Danish, Italian, Spanish, Greek, Finnish, Turkish, Russian, Serbian, and Croatian have been interviewed and tested for attrition in various L2 settings such as Australia (Ammerlaan 1996; Bot/Clyne 1994; Sondergaard 1996; Yagmur et al. 1999), France (Bot et al. 1991), Great Britain (Tsimpli et al. 2004), Ireland (Opitz 2004), Norway (Skaaden 2005), Switzerland (Py 1986), and the United States (Ecke 2004; Gürel 2002, 2004, 2007; Halmazi 2005; Jarvis 2003; Pavlenko 2003, 2004; Schmitt 2004). As international mobility increases, researchers are struggling to determine how the valuable linguistic resources that immigrants bring with them can best be retained without neglecting the importance of integration into their new communities. Some of the factors posited to be associated with L1 attrition are: L1 and L2 competence, language use, identity, language prestige, and ethnolectal vitality.

In the case of the English language, which currently enjoys a certain degree of prestige throughout the world, L1 speakers may be highly motivated to retain their linguistic skills. However, as more and more people use English outside of the traditionally English-speaking countries, presumably there is more pressure on the language to adapt, since it is becoming increasingly “owned” by people proficient in other languages (cf. Anderman/Rogers 2005; Crystal 2003). Indeed, the notion of native speaker and the primacy of the native speaker in educational settings have recently been questioned (cf. Davies 2003; Dostert 2004). English L1 speakers living outside of their native language communities are probably influenced by exposure to the English around them and may begin to accept and even produce non-standard lexis and syntactic structures (see Cook 2003; Porte 2003; or Thomason 2001) or have difficulty accessing certain features of their native language.

For example, Olshtain and Barzilay (1991) found that a group of American native English speakers who had been living in Israel for extended periods of time (at least 8 years) seemed to have much more difficulty retrieving specific lexical items while telling a picture story than a comparison group of Americans living in the United States did. The Americans in Israel resorted to circumlocution, paraphrase or general terms when describing certain parts of the story. In a small study of British speakers living in Italy, Brown (2001) found that some of her informants evinced morphosyntactic transfer from Italian as well as codeswitching and lexical transfer. In a similar vein, Porte’s (1999, 2003) studies of EFL teachers living in Spain suggest that lexical transfer, especially but not only in the field of education, might be quite common among people living outside of their language communities. This can be a particular problem for language professionals, since as Porte (1999: 29) put it:

The native EFL teacher is often contracted and, arguably, maintained in employment, not only on the basis of experience and qualifications, but also because of the assumed authentic native model he or she provides in all aspects of language expertise.
Although not exactly language attrition in the sense of language loss resulting from lack of use (e.g. Ecke 2004; Jessner 2003; Schmid et al. 2004), the eroding of conventionally accepted norms in other-language environments can also be considered a type of attrition. It is well worth exploring, not only for its practical importance for language professionals such as teachers, writers, editors, and translators (cf. Ehrensberger-Dow 2006) but also for its implications about multilinguals’ language systems.

2 English language attrition in Switzerland

In Switzerland, most educated adults are assumed to be multilingual in at least two of the main official languages (German, French, Italian) in addition to English. A complicating factor in the German-speaking part of Switzerland is medial diglossia, in which Swiss-German is used for virtually all spoken interactions (except with foreigners or Swiss from the other language areas) and standard German is used for written communication. Although Swiss-German might be considered a low prestige variant in certain contexts, Swiss-German communities highly value the use of their local dialect as an identity marker. In that part of Switzerland, children usually acquire standard German from exposure to certain media and at school while learning to read and write. French and English are both compulsory language subjects in the public schools, starting in primary or early secondary school and continuing until school completion.

The Swiss-German speaking part of Switzerland hosts the largest number of native English speakers in the country, and medial diglossia can make it particularly difficult for adult non-native speakers to integrate into society there. Not only do they have to learn standard German in order to read and write, they are expected to recognize when and where it is appropriate to use either the dialect or standard German. Added to that is the temptation to resort to English, since most educated Swiss-German speakers have at least passive competence in the language. Because English is so widespread, it is hardly surprising that patterns more closely associated with the community language (in this case, Swiss-German) have emerged in the English used in the German-speaking part. A structure that might sound fine when back-translated into German may be highly marked, if not unacceptable, in English.

In her discussion of language contact, Thomason (2001: 66) suggests that interference is more likely to occur when the contact between languages is more intense and the duration is long. We might therefore expect to find more linguistic differences in the English of native speakers of English who have lived in Switzerland for an extended period of time than in those who have just arrived. Deviations in their use of language might be most visible in the choice of words, since the most frequently proposed constraint on interference is an implicational hierarchy (e.g. words first, grammatical structures later). Applied to the Swiss context, this suggests that the English spoken by native English speakers in Switzerland will deviate most in vocabulary from that of those living in English-speaking countries. It also suggests that the longer the stay, the more likely it is that grammatical structures will be affected, and the more noticeable attrition and negative transfer will become.

Although most people agree that first language attrition is a common phenomenon and there is much empirical evidence for it, researchers have had more difficulty determining which factors predict its extent. There are people whose linguistic abilities seem to be very affected by attrition and others who seem to be relatively immune to it and are able to maintain a high level of natural use despite living in a different language community. Length of time away from the native language community does not seem to be highly correlated with amount of attrition and nor does amount of L1 use (as Schmid 2007 convincingly shows in her carefully designed study of German immigrants in Canada and the Netherlands). As mentioned above, attitudes to the native and surrounding language, degree of competence in the surrounding language, and ethnometalinguistic vitality have all been explored as possible explanations for L1 attrition and maintenance.

To our knowledge, however, the relationship of metalinguistic awareness with L1 attrition has not yet been addressed. Our hypothesis is that metalinguistic awareness can protect speakers from language attrition, allowing them to maintain competence in their native language and preventing negative interference when they learn additional languages.

The claim has been made that bilingualism and learning a second or third language contribute to metalinguistic awareness (Baker Jones 1998: 71–73; Bialystok 1988, Grosjean 2001; Jessner 2006; Nicol 2001). Metalinguistic awareness can be defined as:
the ability to reflect upon and manipulate language(s)

- a sensitivity to what is implied rather than stated
- an analytical attitude towards language

In recent research, we have found that metalinguistic awareness seems to be a feature that distinguishes linguistic strategies used by expert language users such as journalists and translators from those of novices or non-linguists (Perrin/Ehrensberger-Dow 2006; Ehrensberger-Dow/Perrin 2009). What we are exploring in the present paper is whether metalinguistic awareness can help protect English speakers’ L1 resources from becoming attrited when their contact with English is restricted or differs in quality from the contact they would have if they lived in an English-speaking environment. The risk of such attrition may be greater for monolinguals who are suddenly thrust into a new linguistic community, for example when transferred abroad by their company, and have to cope with learning and working in a new language. They may lack the strategies that language professionals and multilinguals seem to have developed to work back and forth between their languages (see Ehrensberger-Dow/Jekat 2005 for an example). If they become long-term residents and live with people who speak the surrounding language fluently (e.g. the children and Swiss spouses of ex-patriots in German-speaking Switzerland), their native language competence in English might be affected and suffer attrition.

2.1 Measuring L1 English attrition in Switzerland

Asking speakers to make grammaticality or acceptability judgements of sentences has proven to be a simple yet effective way of evaluating attrition (cf. Allenberg/Vago 2004) and of tapping into one aspect of speakers’ metalinguistic awareness (Derwing et al. 2002). Certain grammatical structures that have proven problematic in the written English of Swiss students also seem to be judged quite differently by native and non-native speakers (Ehrensberger-Dow/Ricketts 2003). The apparent sensitivity of a relatively simple acceptability judgement questionnaire first described in Ehrensberger and Jekat (2005) is also exploited in this study to investigate whether English speakers living outside of their language community accept and thus might take on patterns more typical of those of non-native speakers in that community (in this particular case, German-speaking Switzerland).

The acceptability judgement questionnaire consisted of 15 sets of four variant sentences each, all containing different combinations of tense and aspect in the verb phrase and adverbials of time, place, or emphasis. Since these grammatical points have been identified in previous research (Ehrensberger-Dow/Ricketts 2003) as problem areas for Swiss learners of English, probably because of differences between the two languages, they were considered likely candidates for attrition effects. Informants were asked to indicate their reaction to each of the 60 sentences by using a simple version of a Likert scale. To avoid suggesting that there was a right or a wrong answer, the instructions specified that any of the rating symbols could be used more than once or not at all in each set of four sentences (see Table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Descriptors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>X</td>
<td>This sentence sounds unnatural and incorrect. I'd never use it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>?</td>
<td>This sentence sounds ok but not very natural. I don't think I'd use it myself.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+</td>
<td>This sentence sounds natural and correct. I'd probably use it myself.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>++</td>
<td>This is definitely my favourite!</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Rating symbols, descriptors and a sample set of sentences from the acceptability judgement questionnaire

The acceptability judgement questionnaire was distributed to representatives of English departments in various educational institutions (i.e. secondary schools as well as colleges and universities) and translation units in businesses in German-speaking Switzerland as well as to other "multipliers" (i.e. people who had expressed their willingness to pass it on to native English speakers). Through this snowball sampling, over 200 completed questionnaires were collected. Those from native speakers were selected and categorized into five groups (see Table 2), based on the sociolinguistic
information provided to questions about language history and current occupations.

To determine whether linguistic background and length of time in Switzerland were related to language attrition, we compared the acceptability judgements of college-educated native English speakers with no particular linguistic training (non-linguists) with those of language professionals (private and public school English teachers and German-English translators). The non-linguists were further sub-divided into two groups based on how long they had been living in German-speaking Switzerland ("newcomers" had been living in Switzerland for fewer than 5 years and "old-timers" for over 5 years). All of the language professionals were native speakers of English who had also been living in German-speaking Switzerland for more than 5 years (which is considered in much of the attrition literature to be the minimum to be able to detect language loss). Reference judgements were obtained from college-educated native English speakers living in Canada, Great Britain, and the United States who were not language professionals.²

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Years in Switzerland</th>
<th>n</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Newcomers</td>
<td>recently-arrived English native speakers (non-linguists)</td>
<td>fewer than 5</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Old-timers</td>
<td>long-term English native speaker residents (non-linguists)</td>
<td>over 5</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public teachers</td>
<td>public school English teachers (secondary³ and post-secondary)</td>
<td>over 5</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private teachers</td>
<td>private school English teachers (adult education)</td>
<td>over 5</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Translators</td>
<td>German-English translators</td>
<td>over 5</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reference group</td>
<td>native English speakers in English-speaking countries</td>
<td>never</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Groups, descriptions, years in German-speaking Switzerland, and size

The rationale for separating the language professionals into three groups was that, although all of them are expected to provide models of natural, correct language, their professional environment might be quite different. The German-English translators are all very competent in German, at least passively, and constantly work between two languages. They are expected to produce natural English texts but may not have to use their German actively. By contrast, the public school English teachers might be functioning more in a bilingual context, since they are integrated into the Swiss school system. The private school English teachers might not need to use German as often, since they are not necessarily functioning professionally in a German-speaking environment. A major difference between both categories of teachers and the translators is that the former are regularly exposed to non-standard English in their classrooms whereas, depending on their social and professional surroundings, the latter may never be.

² There were 10 British, 10 Canadian, and 11 American native speakers in the reference group.

³ There were only 3 secondary school teachers, but since their responses did not seem to differ in any way from the post-secondary teachers, they were combined with the post-secondary teachers.
The positive responses that the informants in the various groups gave to the 60 sentences in the questionnaire (i.e. ++ favourite or + natural) were coded as high acceptability and those rated negatively (i.e. ? or very natural or X unnatural) were coded as low acceptability. To obtain an initial measure of attrition (agreement within each group; see Figure 1), the sentences that at least 90% of the members of each group agreed were of high or low acceptability were identified and the groups’ performance was compared. For example, the reference group agreed on the acceptability of 35 of the 60 sentences (represented by the 58% of the first bar of the histogram in Figure 1). The old-timers (non-linguists over 5 years in Switzerland) agreed on far fewer of the sentences (43%) and the translators agreed on more (65%). An item-by-item analysis revealed that the groups might agree within themselves on items, but that they did not necessarily agree on the same items as the other groups did.

Figure 1: Agreement within each group on all 60 sentences

Because of the disparity between the groups in their judgements of individual sentences, which might be an indication of attrition, we decided to use a subset of the reference group’s judgements as a reference measure and compare the other groups with this. The subset we focused on comprised the 35 sentences that 90% or more of the reference group agreed on. We calculated a score for each member of the other groups, based on whether he or she judged the sentences in this subset the same way (high or low acceptability) as the reference group did (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Average score for the subset of 35 clear sentences

We see that there is very little difference in the performance of the various groups: this measure (average score) does not seem to discriminate well. One possible explanation would be that these 35 sentences were clear cases for all of the informants and the other 25 sentences, which the reference group did not agree on, were the source of differences. In fact, the translators consistently rated nine of those 25 sentences as low acceptability. However, they did not agree on five of the 35 clear sentences (three that the reference group rated high and two that they rated low). Mismatches between the reference group’s judgements and those of the other groups also emerged. Our suspicion was that individual differences were being ignored in the coarse measure of average score per group, so we decided to devise a measure of homogeneity of each group by calculating the percentage of each group in agreement with the reference group on the 35 clear sentences (see Figure 3).

We found a difference in the various groups’ acceptability judgements that seemed to be related to length of time in Switzerland and to linguistic training. The graph in Figure 3 shows that 90% or more of the newcomers and translators agreed on the (non-)acceptability of the 35 clear sentences
compared with about 80% of the English teachers, and only about 60% of the old-timers. Putting this in more positive terms, about 60% of non-linguists living in Switzerland for over five years do not seem to differ from native speakers living in their native language countries on these acceptability judgements. This means that they do not seem to have suffered attrition in the metalinguistic awareness or competence required to make these types of judgements. Some people seem to attrite more than others and the obvious question is why that might be the case.

![](image)

Figure 3: Percentage in agreement with reference group judgements for 35 clear sentences

It is worth looking in greater detail at the groups’ assessments of specific sentences from within the subset of 35 sentences where agreement on acceptability within the reference group is high (over 90%). An analysis of the judgements made by the Switzerland-based groups reveals that they do not diverge from the reference group in their assessments of the tense and aspect elements in these sentences. Place adverbials appear to be equally non-discriminating. However, differences emerge between the groups on judgements of sentences containing temporal and emphatic adverbials.

If we consider the sample set in Table 1, we find that three of the four variants feature among the 35 clear sentences. All groups were in agreement that the variant “He arrived two hours ago.” was highly accept-
able: 100% of the reference group, both groups of non-linguists living in Switzerland, the private teachers and the translators as well as 91% of the public teachers agreed on the acceptability of this sentence. The next variant “He arrived two hours ago already.” was considered unacceptable by all groups, but with a greater range of acceptance level: reference group 97%, both groups of non-linguists living in Switzerland (newcomers and old-timers) 100%, translators 95%, private teachers 90%, and public teachers 78%. The last variant in the set “He arrived already two hours ago.” was also deemed unacceptable by all groups, but again the percentages varied: reference group 100%, translators 95%, private teachers 86%, newcomers 82%, old-timers 80%, and public teachers 78%. In each case, it appears that the agreement of the public teachers with the reference group’s judgements is slightly or clearly less strong than that of the other four groups. Slight deviations occurred in another set of variants which also involved the concept of the adverbial “already”. Indeed, of the ten sentences where the agreement of one or more of the Switzerland-based groups with the reference group was less than 88%, nine involved the concept and use/non-use of adverbials and six were related directly to the concept and use/non-use of “already”. Previous research (Edrnsberger-Dow/Ricketts 2003) has identified the use and position of adverbials to be problematic for German-speaking students. Here, it appears that some of the native English speakers living in Switzerland have become slightly less certain in their judgements of the use of adverbials in general and of already in particular. This may be due to the relative flexibility of adverbials as a clause element in English or, in the case of “already”, to contact with the German concept of “bereits”/“schon”. If so, it may be an example of inappropriate cross-linguistic conceptual transfer of the emphatic feature from the German adverbial (for other examples, see Jarvis/Pavlenko 2008).

Our results suggest that a considerable proportion of non-linguists may start to lose their linguistic sensitivity to naturalness after a number of years away from their language community. The linguistic training of language professionals presumably contributes to their metalinguistic awareness, which may provide a type of “protection” from language attrition, since the group of translators performed at approximately the same level as the group of newcomer non-linguists and the reference group. The public and private school teachers’ performance was lower than that of the translators.
but not as low as that of the old-timer non-linguists, although all of these people had lived in Switzerland for more than 5 years.

The difference between the translators and English teachers might seem puzzling from the standpoint of metalinguistic awareness but could be due to the latter groups' exposure to non-standard English. Although translators constantly work between German and English, they may have little occasion to hear English from non-native speakers whereas the English teachers are constantly processing non-native speech and writing from their students. Despite their linguistic training, their natural intuitions might become affected by the non-standard productions they are exposed to. This might explain why their judgements of sentences with the concept of “already” consistently differed from those of the other groups.

Another explanation for the difference among the groups could be related to their bilingual or multilingual background. By the nature of their profession, the translators must have excellent (passive, if not necessarily active) competence in a language other than their native language, whereas none of the other groups need to. In addition, translators might well have chosen their profession because of a multilingual background or at least a background in languages and/or linguistics. By contrast, English teachers in Switzerland may well have a background in English literature or pedagogy rather than modern languages. High competence in more than one language could well provide a form of protection from language attrition, since the metalinguistic awareness of bilinguals and multilinguals has been shown to be higher than that of untrained monolinguals (cf. Grosjean 2001; Jessner 2006).

3 Issues in measuring attrition

One of the things that has been confirmed in this study is the importance of representative reference data when investigating attrition, since we discovered considerable variation in the acceptability judgements of a substantial number of the sentences (i.e., 25 of 60) by native speakers of English living in English-speaking countries. By focusing on the remaining 35 sentences that the reference group agreed upon, we derived two different measures of attrition: average score per group and proportion of each group in agreement with the reference group. Although average score on tests is a common measure, it lacked discriminatory power in this study, highlighting the need to develop a finer measure to capture subtle differences within groups. The pattern of agreement within each group on all 60 sentences (Figure 1) is mirrored in the proportion of each group in agreement with the reference group on the subset of clear sentences (Figure 3). This parallelism suggests that the groups living outside of their language community might become more similar to each other in their judgements at the same time as they diverge from the native speakers in the reference group.

According to our analyses, some people do seem to become “wobbly” in their acceptability judgements: length of time in Switzerland and linguistic background both seem to be important factors. Language professionals in this study demonstrate less attrition in the naturalness of their judgements than non-linguists. This retention might be related to metalinguistic awareness, use of language, and/or amount of exposure to non-standard productions. This last point could account for the differences between the teachers and translators in the findings reported here, since teachers can be assumed to be regularly exposed to non-native English.

Multiple measures and various sources of data are clearly needed to establish the extent and areas of L1 attrition. The study reported here is part of a larger project in which we have developed a battery of instruments (adapted from Schmid 2007, in order to allow comparability) that is designed to obtain data about sociolinguistic background, language use, lexical access, lexical richness, syntactic complexity, syntactic variation, acceptability, etc. These instruments are currently being used to conduct investigations into L1 attrition in English- and French-speaking bilinguals living in German-speaking Switzerland to test the hypothesis that bilingualism might prevent or reduce L1 attrition. As contradictory as it might seem at first glance, being highly competent in more than one language may actually be the best form of protection from losing either.

4 References


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Beiträge zu den
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