

A Sociolinguistic Perspective on L1 Attrition in First-Generation Immigrant Children

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ARTICLE INFORMATION

Received: August 14, 2021

Accepted: September 22, 2021

Volume: 3

Issue: 10

DOI: 10.32996/jeltal.2021.3.10.5

KEYWORDS

First-language (L1) attrition, immigration, minority languages, prestige, speech communities, language policy, multilingual education.

ABSTRACT

This present review paper will be investigating the topic of first language (L1) attrition, primarily concentrating on how this process is realized in first-generation immigrant children, meaning children who either were born in a country different than the one their parents were born in or foreign-born children whose parents immigrated when that person was very young. This angle is particularly interesting as this L1 attrition is simultaneously co-occurring with second language (L2) acquisition and is connected to a multitude of sociolinguistic factors, the most important of which is the concept of sociolinguistic prestige as well as the concept of age-based speech communities and how the members of these communities influence one another's speech. The main goal is to gain more insight into how first language attrition research has taken into account such complex social matters as well as understanding the effects social/cognitive factors like these have on children who are being exposed to more than one language in their everyday life. To further the understanding of the social component of L1 attrition, this paper presents a comparison between two examples of language policy, in Romania and in the Netherlands, concerning multilingualism in society as well as in education.

1. Introduction

Language attrition, generally defined as the process of losing a language, is one of the most multifaceted and complicated subjects that fall under the discipline of linguistics. However, even though attrition research spans across decades and a large theoretical and empirical body of work has been produced, most questions that have arisen have yet to be answered. Because of its inherently complicated nature as a phenomenon, meaning that already the concept of losing a language that one has already somewhat acquired and its obvious relations to learning and 'forgetting', there are some constraints that have not yet allowed for the formulation of a definitive, all-encompassing framework under which attrition can be completely understood. Attrition is defined as 'the non-pathological decrease in proficiency in a language that had previously been acquired by an individual' by Köpke and Schmid (2004), and the more specific kind of attrition that this paper will briefly analyze is L1 (mother tongue) attrition in first-generation immigrant children.

2. Examining the phenomenon of L1 attrition

Before we proceed to an overview of the factors that are viewed by past researchers as fundamental to influencing and understanding the phenomenon of L1 attrition, it should be noted that not all losses or shifts in language are considered attrition. That changed during the nineties, when attrition research was first reaching widespread popularity, with a taxonomical classification system generally called the 'van Els taxonomy' (Köpke and Schmid 2004), where language loss was separated into four different phenomena that are studied under distinct frameworks. This taxonomy is only important to mention in order to clarify that L1 attrition cannot be studied without integrating it in its social context as it is inextricably linked to immigration; L1 (mother tongue) attrition is only L1 attrition when the loss of proficiency in the language takes place simultaneously with the introduction of another language system by immersion in the environment of the second language system. Meaning that loss of language is only L1 attrition if this loss takes place in an L2 (foreign language) environment with the introduction of said L2 linguistic system. Therefore, L1 attrition is a de facto sociolinguistic phenomenon.

There have been multiple efforts to discover and denominate all the factors that could influence the process of attrition, such as psychological factors (general intelligence, memory, and other general cognitive processes), socio-psychological factors (i.e. language attitude, motivation, prestige, the general discourse of the host countries on minority languages, etc.) and linguistic factors (e.g. the relationship and similarities or lack thereof between the two linguistic systems in question, etc.) (Weltens and Cohen 1989). There is, of course, a large deviation between the research projects that constitute the body of literature on attrition, however, the one factor that is undoubtedly one of the most important ones and relates to most of the others in some way is that of age (Weltens and Cohen 1989; Köpke and Schmid 2004; Hulsen 2000; Anderson 2012). By age, more than one chronological factor are encompassed: age at the onset of the introduction of the L2 linguistic system, age at the onset of bilingualism, and age at the onset of L1 attrition; all of them pointing to the fact that the younger a child is, the more possible it is for them to attrite in the first place, and the deeper they will attrite in the second (Köpke and Schmid 2004). The reason for this is found in theories and models that have been proposed to explain the phenomenon of language acquisition. A question that has been thoroughly investigated is what level of acquisition/mastery of the language has set in before the introduction of the second linguistic system, with some theories proposing that there might be a 'critical threshold' (Weltens and Cohen 1989) which, once established, makes attrition unlikely.

Literacy plays an important role in interaction with age, as it has been shown that the age limit for the onset of severe or complete attrition is around 8-9 years where children will have typically acquired reading and writing skills in at least one language. Another theory that might influence attrition is the existence of a hypothesized critical period, which supports that due to brain maturation constraints and neuroplasticity, language acquisition is facilitated until puberty, making language learning more difficult after that age. This has been applied to attrition by Harley and Wang as "sensitive period" which declines gradually after 6-7 years, implying that the easier it is for a child to acquire L2, the easier it is to attrite in L1, empirical findings so far do suggest that until L1 is somewhat established in the brain, it is quite easy for it to be replaced by an L2 (Köpke and Schmid 2004). Generally, it is more likely for first-generation immigrants 'L1 to be replaced by the L2 than it is for them to remain/become bilingual (Toppelberg and Collins 2010).

All the factors that have been mentioned so far are, nonetheless, completely unable to account for a comprehensive picture of the phenomenon of attrition unless connected to the social context that enables it. Age and level of proficiency/literacy achieved in the L1 before the introduction of the second linguistic system are already examined as sociolinguistic factors in Hulsen's longitudinal study of Dutch migrants in New Zealand (2000). Language use and language contact are related to attrition in a self-evident manner, and this, in turn, is related to a multitude of social concepts and constructs that will be analyzed below. Usually, contact with L1 will happen in the context of the home, social networks, friends, etc., while contact with L2 will happen in more formal contexts, starting with the children's enrolment to school and leading up to the work environment (Hulsen 2000). In children that become bilingual, or 'dual-language children' that will initially lead to a distribution of language competency, meaning that vocabulary that is pertinent to school is going to be more advanced in the L2, while vocabulary related to the context of the home is going to be more advanced in L1. However, that is often not the case, since, due to attitudes towards minority languages from the host country and its society, which can heavily influence identification and emotion in both the children and the parents and can potentially be one of the root causes of later mental health issues (Toppelberg and Collins 2010). The concept of sociolinguistic prestige is perhaps the single most crucial factor, as it can not only be seen directly in a country's societies, legal policies, education systems, and such, but it also has the power to influence and determine multiple other factors that independently influence attrition.

While discussing L1 contact outside the confines of the home, Hulsen (2000) makes reference to the importance of the existence of social networks and speech communities whose existence greatly decreases the possibility of language loss, as it would increase contact in a social environment where the language can be practiced. Specifically, she concluded that German immigrants who maintained steady contact with other L1 speakers through the existence of expat communities, religious groups, and community-based social contexts had managed to avoid both inter- and intragenerational language loss (L1 attrition), in contrast with the Dutch immigrants, whose second generation was already completely monolingual in English. The concept of social networks is closely related to ethnolinguistic vitality, whose status and existence is almost solely dependent on sociolinguistic prestige. Ethnolinguistic vitality is defined in Hulsen (2000, 29) by using Giles's definition: 'that which makes a group likely to behave as a distinctive and active collective entity in inter-group situations'. Whether these groups survive or not is 'dictated' by their strength, both in what level they themselves perceive it and in what level said strength is perceived (Hulsen 2000; Anderson 2012), or, rather, decided by society. That is taken to be explained by four variables; the group's economic status, its social status, its socio-historic status, and its language status, all of which are, in part, determined by prestige.

The research realized by Toppelberg and Collins (2010) examines Latino immigrant children in the US as a case study for the importance of dual-language development, maintenance and education. More specifically, they correlate such practices with the general wellbeing and mental health of immigrant children in the United States and, by extent, immigrant children in general. They

advocate for dual-language acquisition as well as for the encouragement for this from all contexts, mainly on the basis of how L1 maintenance can strengthen family cohesion, intimacy, and the transmission of cultural practices and ideas from the parents to the children, all of which are more likely to lead to a sense of identification and relatability with one's relatives and culture. In monolingual children, emotional and behavioral competence and development are greatly dependent upon language, since language deficits and the inability to express oneself have been proven to lead to learning disorders, aggression issues, anxiety, and depression. 'Semantic competence in the labeling of emotions plays an important role in the regulation of emotional and affective states [...]' (Toppelberg and Collins 2010, 7), and multiple aspects of language and their development have been shown to contribute to the formation of a solid inner narrative and a relatively 'fixed' idea of oneself that can help children understand not only their own present behaviors and understand future reactions and emotional states, but also their communicators' reactions and possible consequences to their actions.

Dominant discourse and policies surrounding minority languages in the US, and in general, usually hinder dual-language acquisition and maintenance, something that is seen from the statistics provided in the aforementioned paper and something that becomes obvious time and time again. US discourse on the existence and use of minority languages is, sadly, very apparent, with discrimination, stigma, and, oftentimes, blatant attacks motivated by raciolinguistic ideologies, being frequent. The sociolinguistic environment in the Netherlands unfortunately does not provide a contrasting view, when it comes to how ethnic minority languages and minority cultures are treated. A report published in 2020 by the Rutu Foundation for Intercultural Multilingual Education paints a harrowing picture of the treatment of minority languages and individuals belonging to ethnic minority groups by teachers and educators in schools. Three testimonies stand out; the first being a description of the school years of the former UN Youth Ambassador for the Netherlands when she was enrolled in a bilingual education programme in high school, where she was regularly receiving negative feedback because of speaking both Dutch and Guyanese English in school and being explicitly told by an educator to 'stop speaking English at home'; the second being another explicit request to a mother to stop speaking French to her children both on school grounds and at home; and the third being a student's expulsion from school because said student was speaking Turkish, in what the school administration deemed 'deliberately provocative' (Language-Based Exclusion, Punishment, and Discrimination in Dutch Education 2020).

The devalued view of minority languages in Dutch society is corroborated by another research published by Kuiken and van der Linden (2013), where they compare language policy and language education in the Netherlands and Romania. The Netherlands has a large number of ethnic minority residents as well as a long history of migration, something that is often advertised by Dutch organizations and institutions in such a way that portrays the opposite of reality -viz. It portrays the country as a welcoming and inclusive space-. Information from the government and local authorities on very crucial subjects, such as healthcare, housing, and public transport, have so far been disseminated and posted in various languages. However, even this is currently under review on the basis of an existing discourse that maintains that it discourages people from learning the Dutch language, thus posing an obstacle for integration (Kuiken and van der Linden 2013, 4). There are two main points where comparisons are drawn between the Netherlands and Romania and those are, firstly, existing legal policies that prohibit discrimination on the basis of language and culture, and, secondly, systemic efforts in the national educational system for the maintenance, protection, and instruction of minority languages. 'The Romanian law guarantees a set of rights to minority language speakers. The Romanian Constitution stipulates (Article 6) that the state guarantees recognized minorities the right to maintain, develop and express their ethnic, cultural, linguistic, and religious identity without any form of discrimination. It also states (Article 32) that the members of minority groups have a right to learn their mother tongue and to be instructed in that language' (Kuiken and van der Linden 2013, 10). There is no such law in the Netherlands and the reason for this is that the policies against racial discrimination that are in place do not consider language to be a valid basis of racial discrimination (Language-Based Exclusion, Punishment, and Discrimination in Dutch Education 2020). This becomes evident in practice as well, since the aforementioned student who was expelled for speaking Turkish on school grounds filed a lawsuit 'invoking the prohibition of discrimination' and was told by the Court that the school is permitted to expel someone for speaking a minority language (Language-Based Exclusion, Punishment, and Discrimination in Dutch Education 2020, 9). When it comes to multilingual education, it is noted that public schools used to receive funding for instruction in minority languages until 2004 when that was discontinued, showing no further systemic effort for the maintenance of native languages and cultural practices of ethnolinguistic minorities in the school context (Kuiken and van der Linden 2013, 12).

The last point to be made is that, particularly in the context of the Netherlands, the systems, policies, and discourses that exist in relevance to minority languages, cultures, and immigration, in general, should not be examined without having colonial and imperial structures the country was built on in mind. In the latest Dutch general election, 'Forum Voor Democratie', the right-wing political party, gained six seats in the Parliament, a figure that, on its own, raises some concerns. In their plan for immigration, they suggest following the 'Australian Model', making reference to the points-based program used by Australian authorities to assign a point number on candidates, deeming them either desirable or not for the labor positions that remain unfilled (Sheftalovich, 2019), and emphasizing that the goal of immigration is assimilation and integration. This point-based system, as well as the FvD's 'ultimate goal' of assimilation, is surprisingly close to the immigration policies of New Zealand during the 1950s, where the country

witnessed a large influx of Dutch migrant workers, due to the devastating consequences of WW2. One additional aspect of the New Zealand immigration model was that until the 1950s, they admitted almost exclusively British migrants because they were seen as the only ones that were white enough to completely assimilate into NZ society (Hulsen 2000, 6-7). The reason why Dutch and Scandinavian migrants/immigrants started being accepted in the country from the 1950s was the sheer necessity to fill labor positions, and it is important to note that 'they were welcome on the basis of their Northern European features and the assumption that they would assimilate', unlike Dutch applicants who were partly Indonesian as well as Southern/Eastern Europeans, who were not allowed to enter the country (Hulsen 2000, 7).

3. Conclusion

In this paper, modern literature on the subject of first-language attrition has been presented and analyzed comparatively for the purpose of presenting a comprehensive and concise overview of the concepts and processes under which the phenomenon of attrition is approached. Language is a crucial part of one's identity, personal as well as collective. This research serves as testimony to that fact, highlighting the interplay of social discourse and language ideology with individual growth, mental health, and ethnolinguistic identity, and language policy and education. Research on such matters is particularly important within the context of contemporary society where mobility is at its zenith, and where we can observe the presence of two opposing phenomena, on the one hand, heightened activist action and demands for accountability, and on the other hand, a concerning rise in conservatism and regressive tendencies, manifesting, among others, into laws and policies aimed at maintaining the hierarchical status quo in society by further infringing on the rights of minority groups. Language has long been used as a tool and, oftentimes, a weapon to maintain a social and class hierarchy, as this paper has shown, therefore, it is absolutely necessary to emphasize that language should not and cannot be investigated as an independent entity, but within the societal context in which it exists, and within the ideologies that make use of it to advance or maintain themselves. Understanding the inextricable nature of the relationship between language and society is the next step to producing meaningful and fruitful research.

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