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Monika S. Schmid
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Language Attrition

'Language attrition' describes the loss of, or changes to, grammatical and other features of a language as a result of declining use by speakers who have changed their linguistic environment and language habits. In such a situation there may, for example, be simplification in the tense system or in certain properties of subordinate clauses; some vocabulary items might fall into disuse and phonetic features may be restructured. These changes can be affected by factors in the speaker's environment, and also by his or her attitudes, and processes of identification. This book provides a detailed and up-to-date introduction to the way in which language attrition can affect language, as well as to the extra- and sociolinguistic features involved. It also familiarizes the reader with experimental approaches to attrition and data analysis techniques and provides hands-on guidelines on how to apply them.

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In memory of Peter Dacher (14 November 1936–15 August 2008)

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Preface

When I graduated from the University of Düsseldorf, Germany, in 1996, I had a topic for my Ph.D. dissertation all worked out. Fifteen years later, I can hardly remember what it was (something to do with a corpus investigation of different sentence types). However, around the same time, I got involved through personal connections in the transcription of a corpus of Oral History interviews with former citizens of Düsseldorf: German Jews, who had had to flee from Germany during the Nazi regime around sixty years earlier, and had lived in English-speaking countries ever since. Their testimonies were being collected for documentation purposes by a Holocaust museum. I was asked to help with the transcriptions, since I had some experience in working with spoken data.

Living with these narratives was a fascinating and moving experience in many ways, and I encountered many stories – about loss, pain and terror, about ignorance, intolerance and cruelty, but also about courage and generosity. Among the diversity of voices, characters and personalities that I came to meet through my headphones, however, one thing began to stand out to me: the astonishing range in the degree of confidence and proficiency which people had retained in their mother tongue. In some cases, if I hadn't known better, I would have sworn that they had never lived outside Germany for a day. In others, I would have been equally certain that they had learned German as a foreign language late in life.

At first, this preoccupation with linguistic issues seemed callous to me. After all, many of the narrators had lost close family, had been exposed to horribly traumatic situations, had been humiliated and robbed of everything short of their own lives. Then it began to dawn on me that the language was so important for precisely that reason: one would have thought that *knowledge* was the one inalienable possession, the one thing that the Nazis could not have taken away from those who escaped. For many, their native language was literally the only thing they retained which their parents had given

them. On the other hand, it was also the language of the persecutors, and had therefore become tainted and despicable. As soon as World War II had broken out, being an expatriate speaker of German was furthermore something highly suspicious – people who had barely escaped from Germany with their lives were now being regarded as potential enemies and spies. For many, there was therefore no choice but to renounce any trace of their German identity, and to become English or American instead. One of the interviewees put it succinctly: ‘When the war broke out, six months after my arrival in England, I vowed that I would never speak, write nor read German ever again.’

It also intrigued me that I was, at first, unable to discern any pattern as to who spoke German perfectly and who didn’t. There seemed to be no clear relationship with immediately obvious factors, such as how old a person had been at the moment of emigration, the amount of use they made of German in their daily lives, whether they had migrated with their families or on their own, and so on. I therefore spoke to the professor who had previously agreed to supervise my Ph.D., Dieter Stein, and told him that I would like to change topics and investigate these interviews instead. He allowed me to go ahead.

My own experience in becoming an attrition researcher is typical in a number of ways. The original interest was sparked by personal involvement, although I may be somewhat atypical in that I got interested *before* I became an attriter myself (that did not happen until after I had finished my Ph.D. and moved to the Netherlands). This is something which often happens: someone encounters what they perceive to be symptoms of attrition, either in themselves or in someone close to them, and becomes intrigued. In many ways this can be a good thing, as a personal interest can help sustain the enthusiasm for the topic through the long years of research and all the bumps and setbacks one will invariably encounter in such a project (particularly if it is a Ph.D.). On the other hand, it also means that one has to be cautious: emotional investment is no substitute for dispassionate research, but it can have a habit of getting in its way. I remember all too well how torn I felt when I came across passages of text which told of homes being demolished, parents being brutalized, relatives being murdered – and had to count how many subordinate clauses they contained.

Secondly, while I was probably atypically lucky in having a Ph.D. supervisor who was kind, generous and supportive in every way one can imagine, my experience was similar to that of many other Ph.D. students who work or have worked on language attrition, in that he had no experience with attrition research. I therefore had to work out the methodology of my investigation more or less on my own, at least

initially. About halfway through my project, I had another stroke of extraordinary good luck: a visiting scholar at my department, Richard F. Young, introduced me to two of the foremost figures in attrition research: Bert Weltens and Kees de Bot – who, at the time, both happened to be working at the University of Nijmegen, no more than an hour's drive from Düsseldorf.

Both these scientists, in particular Kees de Bot, helped me enormously over the coming years. I had regular meetings with them, where I could discuss my progress and my problems. Kees read my work, gave me advice, and even lent me his books (and greater generosity hath no man). I remember one particular incident, where I finished a chapter around 10 p.m. the day before an early morning meeting. I emailed him the chapter, so he would have the latest version – and by the time I got there, he had read it! Both Bert and Kees became, I think, my first true role models, and I am endlessly grateful to both of them – not least for the amount of laughter and teasing that went on during all this (which this particular over-committed and over-serious German Ph.D. student needed more urgently than anything else). There is no doubt that they were an instrumental factor not only in helping me finish at all, but also in remaining at least relatively sane throughout.

Many people, however, are not as lucky in finding a mentor, which is why young attrition researchers are so often in the position where they do not know better than to re-invent the wheel. This has had rather dramatic consequences for the methodology of our evolving field: while there is an increasing number of studies out there, it is hardly ever possible to compare findings. Everyone thinks up their own method of eliciting data and asking questions. They therefore often run the risk of repeating mistakes that have been made before or omitting things that have been shown to be important. If, in addition to that, they are relatively young and inexperienced researchers, basic errors with respect to the research design may also creep in. These will eventually find you out: either at the point at which you are trying to get your degree or when you attempt to get your findings published.

The good news is that things have changed to some extent over the past ten years. Those of us who work on attrition have come to know each other. In particular, a network of young researchers and Ph.D. students has come into existence. During the meetings of this group a number of issues has been discussed, ranging from questions of how to define attrition in the first place to problems relating to the collection and interpretation of data. In particular, we have tried to find experimental approaches which are suitable for investigations of language

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attrition. Our goal has been to develop a common test battery, which can be adapted for investigations of other languages and in other settings.

The intent of this book is to try and make the result of these debates and deliberations available to a larger audience, and to help you in designing and carrying out your own research. Parts I and II of the book present the theoretical and background issues, questions such as what attrition is and how it can manifest itself, but also what the impact of social and personal background factors is on its development. Parts III–V contain a description of the test battery that has been developed. They suggest different instruments and experiments which have previously been applied to language attrition research, and familiarize you with how to develop, use, analyse and interpret them.

Throughout the book, I will try to provide as much hands-on information as possible. Some of the tips I can give may seem self-evident. If so, I apologize – but it is a truth universally acknowledged that if you try to make something idiot-proof, someone will immediately invent a better idiot (or turn themselves into one). The first and most important tip that I can give you is: organize a support structure for yourself. If, for whatever reason, you cannot get the necessary advice and help at the institution where you work, seek it elsewhere. Write to the people who have done similar studies. Go up to people at conferences and introduce yourself; or email them in advance and ask to meet them. Ask their advice. Nine times out of ten, the response will be positive, and you will find that even (or particularly) senior and very well-known researchers are kind, approachable and happy to help.

My own deep thanks go mainly to colleagues with whom I have had this exact experience: Kees de Bot and Bert Weltens, who were mentioned above; and Richard F. Young, who introduced me to them. Barbara Köpke, whom I met at a conference when we were both in the last year of our Ph.D. – and discovered that our posters were not only next to each other, but virtually identical in their gist (although hers was far better executed). This could have been a disaster leading to feuds and blood warfare, but instead turned into the most productive and enjoyable collaboration I have ever known. Aneta Pavlenko, who approached me after a talk at the 3rd International Symposium on Bilingualism (which she had attended by mistake, having got the room numbers wrong, for which temporary bout of anumeria I am deeply grateful), and whose support and encouragement were vital to me over the subsequent years, in particular while I was writing this book. I owe much of it to her critical reading and excellent advice, and Part I is based almost entirely on the framework she developed. Marjolijn

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Preface

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Verspoor, who was also kind enough to read and criticize the manuscript for this book, chaired the very first talk I ever gave at an international conference – and ten years later, I was not only working in the same department as she, but in an office a few doors down from hers. (I think I am beginning to sound like some rather creepy stalker. . .)

I'd also like to thank my present and former Ph.D. students Merel Keijzer, Hanneke Loerts, Tedi Mehotcheva, Farah van der Kooi and Gülsen Yılmaz for 'test-driving' large parts of this text (and Gülsen specifically for helping me with the endless tedium of checking the references and making sure I got the diacritics in the Turkish examples right), as well as the members of the Language Attrition Graduate Network. I have learned at least as much from those that I have attempted to teach as I have from those who taught me. Amber Nota, Bregtje Seton and Christopher Bergmann were invaluable in their help with the proofs.

When you are conducting research on language attrition, you furthermore depend crucially on the kindness of strangers – migrants who fall into your target population, and who are willing to donate their time and knowledge for research that is often tedious. More than anything else, I have often been surprised and overwhelmed by the generosity and helpfulness of the people that I was privileged to meet. I would like to name one person here specifically, Peter Dacher (formerly Dächer) of Vancouver, Canada. His kind help, and his quirky Rhenanian humour, were very important to me during my fieldwork there in 2004. Sadly, he died of cancer on 15 August 2008. I dedicate this book to his memory, in recognition of the help I have received from him and others in the expatriate community of Vancouver and elsewhere.

The work presented here would not have been possible without the financial support from the Dutch National Science Foundation NWO.¹

Lastly, I would like to thank my husband, Chris McCully – whom, incidentally, I also met at a conference . . . But that is another story, to be told another time.

Abbreviations

ANCOVA	analysis of covariance
ANOVA	analysis of variance
ATH	Activation Threshold Hypothesis
CAF	complexity, accuracy and fluency
CHILDES	Child Language Data Exchange System
CLI	cross-linguistic influence
ERP	event-related potential
EVT	Ethnolinguistic Vitality Theory
FiCA	Fluency in Controlled Association task (Verbal Fluency Task)
GJT	grammaticality judgment task
L1	first language
L2	second language
LOR	length of residence
ME	magnitude estimation
NP	noun phrase
PNT	Picture Naming Task
PWMT	Picture Word Matching Task
RSVP	rapid serial visual presentation
RT	reaction time
SLA	second language acquisition
SQ	sociolinguistic questionnaire
SRB	Serial Response Box
TTR	type-token ratio
UG	Universal Grammar
VFT	Verbal Fluency Task
VOT	Voice Onset Time
VP	verb phrase