

Is First Language (L1)-Attrition a competence or a performance problem?

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Recently, the phenomenon of L1-attrition has become a subject of research, especially in relation to the interface hypothesis (IH, SORACE 2005, TSIMPLI et al. 2004, WILSON et al. 2009). According to the IH, constructions requiring the integration of syntactic knowledge with knowledge from other domains exhibit optionality in L1-attrition (and residual optionality in L2-development). As to the distribution of overt and null subjects (OS/NS) in relation to topic-shift and topic-continuity contexts, L1-Italian near-native L2-English speakers tested on subject use after prolonged exposure to English overgeneralized OS, performing significantly different from Italian monolinguals (and similar to L2-Italian speakers).

This study investigates the language of an attrited speaker of a pro-drop-L1 (Bulgarian), a near-native speaker of a non-pro-drop-L2 (German). Spontaneous production data of two recordings (250 utterances) was analyzed as to pronominal subject use and compared to that of ten Bulgarian monolinguals (nine individual 200-utterance-recordings and 1000 utterances for one speaker with four recordings). OS/NS rates per clause were counted and statistical analyses were carried out. The two data sets of the attrited speaker were recorded in two different language settings – the L2 country (RC, country of residence) and the home country (HC) which is only rarely visited. While the RC recording shows OS rates corresponding to the OS patterns reported in the above studies and is significantly higher than the rates of the monolingual speakers (with a value of 47%), the HC recording shows an OS rate of 34% and thus falls within the range of the monolingual 13 recordings (16% to 36%, $\mu = 27\%$).

This finding could be interpreted as evidence that L1-attrition is a performance problem, highly influenced by the factor of language background. Future research will show if this can be confirmed for more speakers. If so, an important difference between L1-attrition and L2-development could be established which will have to be taken into account in formulations of the IH.

References:

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