

'Slipping through my fingers': under what circumstances do multilingual migrants lose or maintain their native language?

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Research on Germanic languages is characterised by a profound awareness of diachrony: the notion of *change* underpins much of the work carried out in this field. Such change can occur over different timescales and in different settings, e.g. the long-term changes observed in the language of entire speech communities (the traditional purview of Historical Linguistics), more rapid changes in settings where different linguistic populations exist in close proximity or contact (e.g. Enclave Varieties or Creolisation) or changes predominantly linked to issues of cross-generational transmission (e.g. Heritage Languages). My talk today will introduce a type of linguistic change which has only relatively recently become part of the mainstream research agenda: the developmental process occurring in the native language within the lifespan of individuals (usually migrants) who become bilingual at some point after adolescence, known as *first language attrition* (e.g. Schmid, 2011; Schmid & Köpke, 2017).

It is a well-established finding that speakers who use more than one language in their daily lives develop increased variability concerning their L1 skills across the full range of the linguistic repertoire, from phonetics through the lexicon and morphosyntax to pragmatics and beyond. I will first review the solid empirical basis of research on these linguistic aspects of language attrition, summarising the state-of-the-art of knowledge on both the scope and the limits of this development. In the second part of my talk, I will turn to explanatory approaches and attempts at identifying predictive factors, asking which features of an individual's personal background, language habits and experience, and attitudes and motivation may contribute to making someone a good vs. a poor L1 maintainer. As I will show, knowledge on these predictors of change and variability in attriting populations is far more limited to date than on the linguistic aspects of attrition. In particular, the commonsense notion of 'use it or lose it' has – perhaps surprisingly – received very little empirical support.

I propose that the current lack of insight into the predictors of attrition is, at least in part, due to two factors: firstly, the fact that investigations of L1 attrition are typically limited to data from the first language (while investigations of second language acquisition tend to ignore changes to the L1 and treat it as a stable and invariable baseline) and secondly, the fact that statistical models based on linear relationships (i.e., regression slopes) fall short of capturing the full picture. Based on a recent investigation (Schmid & Yilmaz, under review) I propose an integrated perspective, capable of treating both L1 and L2 skills as part of an overall continuum which can best be captured in multi-dimensional, multi-directional and multi-factorial models. I will demonstrate how such an approach can contribute substantially to our understanding of the manner and degree to which a native language may (or may not) change within the lifespan of a single bilingual individual.

References:

Schmid, M. S. (2011). *Language Attrition*. Cambridge University Press.

Schmid, M. S. & Köpke, B. (2017). The relevance of first language attrition to theories of bilingual development. Epistemological keynote article, *Linguistic Approaches to Bilingualism* 7:6 (2017), 637–667.

Schmid, M. S. & Yilmaz, G. under review. Predictors of language dominance: an integrated analysis of first language attrition and second language acquisition in late bilinguals.