Attrition of L1 English
By Susan Dostert

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“Sometimes I feel as if there’s a big hole in my head where English used to be” is a statement that is typical of native speakers who have been living in a foreign country for a while with reduced or even nonexistent opportunities to communicate in their L1, and this is known as language attrition.

Language attrition is the loss of a first or second language or a portion of that language by either a community or an individual.

Many studies now show that after some years in an L2 environment, many speakers tend to experience some degree of difficulty when forced to communicate solely in their L1. But, previous studies didn’t always find evidence of L1 attrition.

For example, in De Bot & Clyne’s study (1994), they found no sign of attrition in their study of Dutch immigrants in Australia, even though some of their informants had been living in the L2 environment for at least 25 years.
• Studying the attrition of L1 English in other European countries is controversial and often shows different results because English is widely spoken by people in the country, especially those that are younger.

• For example, in Germany, there are English-speaking radio stations, English films, and there are many native speakers of English living there because of the presence of the British and American armies until the end of WWII and because English is an important language in business.

• Compared to other speakers in Germany, it does not seem like English native speakers should lose their language in this country. However, attrition is a process that begins quite early when a speaker undergoes a lot of long-term exposure to a language other than their L1.
The research project described in this paper involves studying British English subjects living in Germany for signs of L1 attrition.

According to the Activation Threshold Hypothesis, the degree of L1 attrition is affected by the quality and quantity of L1 input to which the speaker is exposed. So speakers who frequently interact with other native speakers of English (in English) will exhibit less attrition than those who do not.

In this study, around 40 subjects will be tested who have diverse biographies and varying access to native-like input.
This ranges from people who work professionally with English (like English teachers) to those who have had almost no contact with English or English speakers since emigration (like ex-soldiers who married German women and continue to live in Germany or people who do not associate with many native speakers).

Then between these two extremes are groups that include people who work for international companies, who are usually more or less bilingual but don’t use their L1 in such an active way like the teachers.

A preliminary (sociolinguistic) questionnaire will be used to gather information on exposure to English in the workplace but also in the home. For example, “does the speaker live together with someone who is a native speaker of either their L1 (English) or their L2 (German)?”
Initially, the expectation from these groups would be that someone working as an English teacher, living with another English native speaker associating with many native speakers, who also made many trips back home would exhibit fewer and less significant difficulties communicating in the L1 (or show less signs of attrition) than someone else who doesn’t use English in his / her professional life, lives with a monolingual German native speaker and and doesn’t associate with other native speakers or travels back home regularly.

Other factors, like L2 proficiency, language attitudes and typological similarity which previously have been found to affect attrition, also will be investigated in Dostert’s study.
• This study is part of a larger research project involving the three typologically similar languages, German, Dutch, and English, each as L1 and L2.

• So, in addition to this study with the combination L1 English / L2 German, L1 German / L2 English and L1 Dutch / L2 German was also studied.

• For the first time, researchers will gather data from L1 attriters and control groups in Germany, The Netherlands, England and Canada using the same methods.

• This would then allow the results to be compared, and lead to some very interesting data. For example, the attriters in Germany can be compared with those in the Netherlands, and also with the L2 English speakers (especially L1 German / L2 English).
Attrition as an example of ideal adaptation

In studies on attrition, it is often assumed that if the phenomenon exists at all, it is to be looked upon in a negative light.

The speech of attriters is compared the speech of real native speakers who are monolingual and have always lived in the L1 environment, and any differences are labeled errors or mistakes.

In conducting the experiment, Dostert questions the way in which attriters and attrition is generally viewed, and suggests that what has in the past been considered errors should instead be regarded as a linguistic systems which have been adapted to fulfill the communication needs of the speaker with long-term exposure to a bilingual environment.
• Dostert notes that it isn’t the attriter’s ability to communicate that is affected, but instead the ability to communicate just using the L1.

• As long as the attriter is in a bilingual situation where both speakers are equally experienced in both languages, communication is usually fine and codeswitching can be used.

• It is usually only when the L1 attriter is in a monolingual situation where codeswitching is not an option and only the L1 can be used, that more severe difficulties are experienced.
A neurological explanation for attrition

Recently, there has been a lot of neurological research claiming that the brain seems to continue to adapt to input throughout its entire lifetime, not just during childhood or adolescence as was previously believed.

This would mean that one’s language system can change according to the sensory input received. So even adults who move to a new linguistic environment can have changes in their languages like lexical retrieval problems, which is common in attrition.

Also, it can be expected that the amount of change depends on the degree to which the new input differs from previous input.
• It is because of these varying degrees that Dostert plans on dividing the attrition informants into groups according to the quantity and quality of their L1 input since living in the L2 environment.

• Attrition can then be an adaptation that the brain undergoes after being exposed to mixed linguistic input (L1 and L2).

• This view doesn’t allow researchers to figure out exactly which areas of language will be affected (like will phonology or morphology suffer more?) but it states that the brain is flexible and language is a dynamic system (even long after acquisition in adulthood), so changes in language ability can occur (called attrition) and they reflect these changes in input.
Dostert's dissertation

- The article does not report any actual results.
- However, Dostert's dissertation (completed in 2009) does.
- The interesting part comes on page 155 - the attriters did NOT show any difference with monolingual L1 controls on tests of competence,
- and only showed increased hesitation features (pausing) in retelling a film.
- This is actually evidence for performance rather than competence being affected!