

Unbridled Attrition?

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A model that can accommodate several “distinct” language development scenarios seems to be a step in the right direction. After all, to the extent that Universal Grammar is considered a biological component of the human condition, a unified treatment of language acquisition should be preferable, particularly for those who subscribe to the view that the human language capacity remains at work throughout the lifespan. This unification has (at least) two desirable outcomes. First, the theoretical underpinnings are simplified: for example, multilingual language acquisition may be considered just a generalized extension of monolingual language acquisition, with the same underlying mechanisms at work. Second, it provides us with a new normal, under which phenomena such as attrition, even if ecologically rare, are not unexpected. The Attrition via Acquisition model proposed by Hicks and Domínguez (this issue; henceforth H&D) exhibits the necessary ambition, as it accounts for attrition even beyond a processing/use level, but couches this in a larger model of acquisition. However, without applying some brakes to the mechanisms, it leaves me wondering why we aren’t all attriting all the time.

At the heart of the model is the inference engine, which drives speaker-internal language change. Encountering the type of input that would invoke the inference engine is probably not that unusual, and perhaps never stops. It’s therefore worth re-examining the reality of what a monolingual speaker is exposed to throughout the lifetime; I’ll note here some examples that may be common to native English speakers. Formal education imparts some embellishments on our fully-formed grammars as we encounter the “standard” variety of the language. Aside from the development of vocabulary (which is a lifelong experience), contributions from education include: the addition of new structures, such as V2 in English (*Never have I seen ...*); increased facility with certain structures more frequent in text, such as passives (see e.g. Street & Dąbrowska, 2007); attempts to browbeat certain structures from the grammar, via prescriptivist instructions to never split infinitives, that a preposition is something one shouldn’t end a sentence with, etc. Some characteristics of my native, Midwest North American dialect, such as doubles negatives, are fundamentally at odds with the standard variety. Yet, the educated speaker often receives input from, continues to maintain, and is generally able keep separate the two (or more) varieties. What distinguishes this type of language knowledge/use from attrition?

Beyond education, a non-negligible number of speakers will encounter both native speakers of other varieties and non-native speakers. Native speakers of other varieties will, like the example given by H&D in the present paper, be largely intelligible to the potential attriter in question, but will vary in differing degrees from the attriter’s idiolect, possibly at multiple levels of the grammar. Despite a plethora of input to the contrary, I continue to mispronounce my mother-in-law’s name (one very common in English) due to dialectal differences. My home continues to be a linguistic battleground where the weapons of grammatical destruction are structures present in my wife’s native dialect, but not in mine (*I’ll call you when I’m done work*) or in mine, but not in hers (*Gas is so expensive anymore*). Perhaps even further afield, non-native speakers will likely have a distinct phonological system, if not a distinct syntactic, semantic, or pragmatic system, be it through acquisition of a different dialect or “fossilization” in some sense. Even near-native L2 speakers may converge on an L2 English grammar that is distinct from the

target, either in a systematic or erratic way, providing input that is comprehensible to, although likely ungrammatical for, native speakers.

It shouldn't seem uncommon, then, that those who have access to education, those who move away from the region of their native dialect, those who have frequent contact with non-native speakers, not to mention those who speak two or more languages—i.e. your typical linguist, and many other types of people—are constantly exposed to input which is distinct from their native variety, but is also intelligible and at some point is able to be assigned perceptual representations. These are two of the necessary conditions put forth by H&D (p. 16/XX) for L1 attrition. The obvious question here is, if this situation is not uncommon (or perhaps even the norm) among monolingual speakers, why isn't attrition more common? Such exposure should keep the inference engine active, and spur attrition. Attrition should manifest in the proliferation of supplements to the grammar, and, in the end, the speaker is left with an English that is a bag of linguistic contradictions. In some situations, this is clearly the case, as evidenced in speakers who can navigate multiple registers that contain such contradictions (e.g. those who speak varieties with *be*-deletion and double negatives and also speak academic English, which lack these characteristics). In other situations, a speaker may comprehend speech that utilizes an option that is not a part of their native dialect, suggesting that it is represented at an underlying level, without the speaker ever utilizing that option in production. This could be comprehension across dialects—imagine a British English speaker living in a sea of North American rhoticity, yet remaining faithfully non-rhotic in speech—or comprehension of systematic L2 errors. Why does the optionality (i.e. attrition) arise in some cases, but not others? And what is the line between incorporating phenomena into a grammar vs. simply being accommodating of a non-native dialect or L2 speech?

These problems should of course be compounded in adult L2 speakers, who have an additional linguistic system pressuring their L1. At issue here is how grammars are conceptualized within the generative framework, and how a speaker compartmentalizes (or not) multiple grammars. On the one hand, we know that speakers of two or more languages are able to differentiate them in both comprehension and production from the earliest stages (see e.g. Meisel 1990, 1994). On the other, we know that the languages of a speaker may interact in the form of cross-linguistic influence (e.g. Kupisch 2007), and that exposure to linguistic stimuli can activate phonological and semantic neighbors both within and across languages (e.g. Marian, Blumenfeld, & Boukrina, 2008). Linguistic systems (of distinct languages within a speaker), therefore, seem to be insulated from each other yet networked with each other. How multiple linguistic systems are organized is a non-trivial issue for H&D because it underlies their distinction between bilingual and bidialectal attrition, which appear to be processes that are fundamentally dissimilar: one pares down (or at least modifies in a non-additive way), and one augments. In bilingual attrition, there are two systems, where “acquired morphosyntactic features of the relevant L2 lexical item ‘update’ the L1 grammar” (p. 20/XX). In bidialectal attrition there is only one system, to which new lexical items or functional categories (from the other dialect) with their associated features are added; there is no erosion of the grammar here because “the L1 grammar itself remains active in processing for both production and comprehension” (p.18/xx). It seems, then, in cases where the existing grammar can handle the input well enough, a new grammatical option can be added, as opposed to modifying what's already there. This view may have consequences for how linguistic systems are created in the first place. In monolingual language acquisition, one could imagine that a child's grammar develops to a point where it can handle adult input ‘well enough,’ and instead of continuing to develop through modification to

settle on the target options of the adult grammar, the process becomes an additive one in which the child's grammar contains mutually exclusive options. For second language acquisition, one would have to seriously entertain the notion that speakers of two languages that exhibit a certain amount of mutual intelligibility are really just adding options to one grammar. If the degree of overlap between the two languages/varieties is the determining factor here, one may wonder how much dissimilarity between varieties is sufficient to grow a separate grammar, and what the consequences are for attrition. Is a speaker of Spanish and Italian more likely to undergo attrition, or be affected more quickly, than a speaker of less related languages like Spanish and German? Would attrition manifest in a qualitatively similar way (i.e. augmentation vs. loss)?

A hallmark of first language acquisition is that speakers in a community converge on a grammar with little variation, relative to the substantial variation they are exposed to in the input. This relationship seems to characterize first language attrition as well. For some speakers, if not many, conditions seem to be ripe. Yet, despite varying degrees of intelligible exposure to other dialects, non-native speech, other languages, or of reduced L1 input or use—a native language often remains largely unchanged. So, while H&D have given us a road to erosion even at the deepest levels of the grammar, some limits need to be established such that the model sets the correct pace for the observed rate of attrition.

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