PICKING UP THE THREADS: FIRST LANGUAGE ATTRITION AND PROFESSIONAL RE-IMMERSION

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A VERY MULTILINGUAL AUDIENCE
A VERY MULTILINGUAL AUDIENCE

L2

English | German | Greek | Spanish | Amharic | Arabic | Dutch | French | Finnish

0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1
A VERY MULTILINGUAL AUDIENCE

- percentage of attendants who report that their L1 is their strongest language (or one of their strongest languages)
  - 81%

- percentage of attendants who report using a second language in their professional daily lives
  - 81%
TRANSFER OF SKILLS BETWEEN LANGUAGES

• the paradox of professional migrants:
  • we are aware that we need to learn the language skills underpinning professional skills acquired in a native language (L1)
  • but if training and experience was done only in a second language (L2), we tend to assume we can also do it in our L1
• being a native speaker is regarded as a kind of ‘birthright’
TRANSFER OF SKILLS BETWEEN LANGUAGES

• there are three problems with this assumption:
  • specialised skills do not develop by themselves
  • general skills may erode over time, due to non–use (L1 attrition)
  • languages change, so even intact knowledge may no longer be up to date
WHAT IS L1 ATTRITION?

“Mma Ramotswe had once come across somebody who had forgotten his Setswana, and she had been astonished, and shocked. This person had gone to live in Mozambique as a young man […].

When he came back to Botswana, thirty years later, it seemed as if he were a foreigner […]. To lose your own language was like forgetting your mother, and as sad, in a way. We must not lose Setswana, she thought, even if we speak a great deal of English these days, because that would be like losing part of one's soul.”

(Alexander McCall Smith. The Full Cupboard of Life)
Olympic boxer Regilio Tuur
native speaker of Dutch
moved to New York in 1988 (aged 21)
2014: participated in Dutch TV show *Sterren Springen*
ATTRITION ‘IN THE WILD’, PART 2

• tennis player Stefanie Graf
• born and raised in Germany
• moved to US in 2000 (age 33) upon marrying English native speaker (Andre Agassi)
• media award ceremony in 2007

Stefanie Graf
ATTITUDES TO ATTRITION

• many people believe that attrition does not exist but is an affectation
• people who are publicly seen to have experienced L1 attrition are usually mocked and/or insulted on social media (the comments about Tuur on Twitter were not pretty...)
ATTITUDES TO ATTRITION

The joys and benefits of bilingualism

Tobias Jones

More than half the world's population is now bilingual. Now thought to encourage flexibility of mind and empathy, bilingualism is also transforming societies
I live in Brittany. My wife does not speak any English apart from "I love you" and "Shut up!". I find it very difficult when I have to speak English as it is very very rare. I too tend to drop in French words when I do speak English.
ATTITUDES TO ATTRITION

Firstly why should he?
Secondly - it's very believable. I have a relative who has resided in the Netherlands for over 40 years. She inadvertently uses Dutch vocabulary mid conversation occasionally. As does my Vietnamese wife.
Losing your first language? Here’s how to rediscover your voice

*Monika Schmid*

Expats are often shaky in their mother tongue. But fear not: the fight in the brain known as language attrition can be stopped

*Monika Schmid is a professor in linguistics at the University of Essex*
ATTITUDES TO ATTRITION

This whole article is utter nonsense.

→ Reply  ◀ Share
ATTITUDES TO ATTRITION

[Comment]

...what makes you say that? I recognise myself in this article having lived in the UK for the last 15 years and rarely getting to speak my native French saved for the odd call to family or my yearly week in my hometown. Once in a blue moon, I may have to exchange emails with a French client and I just dread those times as I have lost all confidence in my spelling which used to be top notch. Worse, my syntax has become abysmal and let's not get started on conjugating verbs properly. So no, I don't think this article is "utter nonsense". But I would be keen to understand why that's your opinion on the article.

[Options]

Report
ATTITUDES TO ATTRITION

My grandfather's experience with his native tongue squares well with the article. My Polish barber's experience with her native tongue squares well with the article.

Reply Share

Really? What's your basis for that claim? I ask because I recognise a lot of what happened to my Dad's command of his original language in the article.

Reply Share
ATTITUDES TO ATTRITION

Why do you say that? Do you not speak any other languages? Believe me when I say that each language has its own thought-lines and attitudes. Even if those of us who speak several (me 3, my wife 5) & who switch easily from one to the other are acutely aware that we are changing our "thought-paths", like going over points on a railway - you can't think in French and speak English, for example. In my personal case, after 40 years of rarely using English with native speakers, like the author I often wonder whether what I'm saying is correct & what native speakers would say.
ATTITUDES TO ATTRITION

Ok. I live in the reverse. I never ever speak English. I do read English in the Guardian. Most of my official writing is in French. Ok I hate it and use Open Office to correct me. I have 100% confidence in writing English. I have never lost that. Speaking English takes a short time of correction. If I telephone the UK for official reasons I may be not confident but then I quickly drop into the local accent and my English is perfect.

The author suggested that English or European citizens may encounter difficulties. I do not think so.

I had a good friend who was fluent in English, French, German, Spanish and Italian. For a few minutes she got confused when changing countries because she thought in the previous language. The brain need a short time to switch. I think all day in French except when I come on the Guardian.
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ATTITUDES TO ATTRITION

all three comments were made by the same person!!
ATTITUDES TO ATTRITION

- many people believe that attrition does not exist but is an affectation
- ... including people who, two months earlier, claimed to experience it themselves...
- what chance have we got...?
WHAT TO EXPECT WHEN YOU’RE ATTRITING

• you may produce:
  • sentences that go badly wrong
  • very disfluent speech (pauses, hesitations, *uhm* etc.)
  • borrowings and switches
  • inappropriate language (request–making, politeness)
  • a more or less pronounced foreign accent
  • very weird expressions
WHY IS THIS A PROBLEM?

- we gauge other people’s functioning (cognitive skills, intellect, capability, …) based on how they speak
- this has a big impact for L2 users
- but it can also be a problem in the native language
FLUENCY AND HESITATION

• all naturalistic spoken speech has disfluencies (pauses, *erm*, fillers such as ‘like’, ‘you know’ etc.)

• not all of these are indicative or problems of retrieval or speech production (they also structure the message)

• attriters use more hesitations, some of them in places where monolinguals don’t

> appear less confident (and, therefore, less competent)

VOCABULARY

- attriters tend to overuse more frequent words and underuse rarer (‘more sophisticated’) ones
- a broad vocabulary is often used to ‘dazzle’ and create an impression of expertise
  ➢ appear less expert and less intelligent

GRAMMAR

- attriters sometimes have a preference for ‘more straightforward’ grammatical structures
- main clauses instead of subordinate ones
  - can reduce the processing load (easier to keep track)
  - some languages have different word order in main and subordinate clauses (easier to stick to one pattern)
- “John was tired. He went home.”
- “John went home because he was tired.”

- can create impression of less analytic/strategic thinking
GRAMMAR

• attriters sometimes have a preference for ‘more straightforward’ grammatical structures

• overt vs. null pronouns
  • “Where is John?” – “He’s at the hotel.”
  • Dónde está Juan?” “Está en el hotel.” (lit.: “Is at the hotel.”)
  • Dónde está Juan?” “Él está en el hotel.”

• overt pronoun would not be used unless contrastive or emphatic

• attriters have tendency to overuse pronouns where monolinguals wouldn’t

➢ can create impression of overstating the obvious, not being attuned to informational needs of interlocutor

WEIRD THINGS MIGRANTS SAY

• structures and idiomatic expressions are literally translated:
  • English: *to run for office, to run short of something*
  • Spanish: *correr para gobernador*
  • German: *ich renne kurz an Briefpapier*
MORE SUBTLE ASPECTS OF ATTRITION

• attrition does not just concern vocabulary, accuracy or fluency
• each language has its own conventions and (mostly) unwritten rules on how to interact
• for example: familiar and polite pronouns (the T–V distinction)
• many languages make this distinction
# PRONOUNS OF ADDRESS

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# Pronouns of Address

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**English**: I, you, he, she, it

**French**: je, tu, il, elle

**German**: ich, du, er, sie, es

**Spanish**: yo, tú, él, ella

**Dutch**: ik, jij, hij, zij, het
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WHEN TO USE THESE PRONOUNS

• ... it’s complicated!
• e.g. German:
Du oder Sie?
A Simple Visual Guide

1. is other person a child?
   - yes: du
   - no: is other person a blood relative?
     - yes: du
     - no: are you currently engaged in sports?
       - yes: have you had/do you have intimate relations?
         - yes: du
         - no: is other person a bureaucrat?
           - yes: Sie
           - no: does/should this person have gray hair?
             - yes: has he/she explicitly offered du?
               - yes: Sie
               - no: is this person an old 68er?
                 - yes: Sie
                 - no: have you gotten drunk with this person?
                   - yes: Berlin
                   - no: are you in Munich or Berlin?
                     - yes: Munich
                     - no: do you say du to their spouse or life partner?
                       - yes: more than four piercings and/or three tattoos?
                         - yes: unclear - avoid using second person, use only third person impersonal
                         - no: no
                       - no: unclear - avoid using second person, use only third person impersonal

1. A child by age, not behavior.
2. Feelings toward relative irrelevant.
WHEN TO USE THESE PRONOUNS

• ... it’s complicated!
• e.g. Dutch:
  • many people use formal pronoun to address grandparents and parents (unthinkable in German, linked to age and background)
  • married couple: he addresses his own parents with formal pronoun, she addresses her in-laws with informal
• e.g. French:
  • Simone de Beauvoir, *Les Mandarins*: husband uses *tu* to wife, she uses *vous* to him
WHEN TO USE THESE PRONOUNS

• can be difficult even for monolinguals
• tricky for attriters for three reasons:
  • we have changed (we are older than when we left, may have different social position)
  • our language has changed (we are used to the conventions of our second language)
  • the language of our home country has changed (many languages have trend towards more use of informal)
• however, getting it wrong can be disastrous!
EVEN MORE SUBTLE ASPECTS OF ATTRITION

- politeness isn’t just a matter of pronouns, of course:

  “I can only fall silent because thirty seconds into the conversation, I have already failed at an important task: while I was bowing and saying hello, I was supposed to have been calculating the other person’s age, rank, and position in order to determine how polite I should be for the rest of the conversation.”

STILL MORE SUBTLE ASPECTS OF ATTRITION

• we use language to establish relationships and demarcate our roles in these relationships
• choice of style, body language etc. vary depending on which role we are in
• we learn how to project a professional persona due to experience (most of us have never been taught this)
• it is a dangerous fallacy to assume such knowledge translates between languages!
MORE STILL MORE SUBTLE ASPECTS OF ATTRITION

• styles and conventions of (professional) interaction vary between languages:
  • body space/distance
  • how to make a polite request
  • how to offer to do something
  • …
• the way this is done in one language can appear rude, pushy, overly ingratiating, … in another
SO, WHAT SHOULD WE DO...?

• not this!
SO, WHAT SHOULD WE DO...?

• not this!
• nor this!

Terence Cass  4m ago
This whole article is utter nonsense.

Terence Cass  2h ago
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SO, WHAT SHOULD WE DO...?

• become aware of what is going on
• if you have to write an important letter, ask someone to read it
• if you have to speak your native language in an important setting (e.g. job interview)
  • rehearse the situation
  • if possible, immerse yourself in the language for a few days beforehand
• don’t be afraid to say if you cannot remember a word or are unsure what it means
SO, WHAT SHOULD WE DO...

• ... and if people still don’t believe you, send them here:
  https://languageattrition.org
  www.facebook.com/languageattrition