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**Post-Graduate Studies**



**A Course in Applied Linguistics**  
**M.A. in English Language and Linguistics**

**(Language Attrition)**

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## 1. Introduction

Language attrition is considered to be a reversal of language acquisition: where language acquisition is a process during which the proficiency in a first or second language increases, in the process of language attrition, lack of contact leads to a reduced level of proficiency in the attriting language (Olshtain, 1989).

Definitions which base language acquisition on actual loss of knowledge and on “incomplete acquisition” as well as unhelpful for the description of language attrition.

The task of the study of language attrition is to provide a more detailed analysis and explanation, to describe the observed process of loss from linguistic as well as sociolinguistic perspectives. Such an analysis has to take into account observed differences in the application of rules of grammar and lexical selection between attrited and non-attrited language use.

## 2. What Is “Language Attrition”?

Language attrition refers to a gradual reduction or loss of linguistic knowledge and skills in an individual. It is defined as “the non-pathological decrease in proficiency in a language that had previously been acquired by an individual” (Kopke & Schmid, 2004, p. 3). The use of the word “non-pathological” illustrates that the decline in proficiency is caused by a change in one’s contact with the language(s) in question. This definition also makes it clear that the attrition phenomenon takes place in an individual, rather than in groups or speech communities.

This process generally occurs due to both isolation from speakers of the first language (“L1”) and the acquisition and use of a second language (“L2”), which interferes with the proper production and understanding of the first language. It occurs among speakers for whom a language other than their first language has begun to play an important role in every day life; These speakers are more likely to experience language attrition.

## 3. Models and Theories

Four theoretical models and frameworks available to the study of language attrition:

### 1. Jakobson’s regression hypothesis

first formulated by Jakobson and originally formulated on the phonology of Slavic languages, goes back to the beginnings of psychology and psychoanalysis. It states that which was learned first will be retained last, both in 'normal' processes of forgetting and in pathological conditions such as aphasia or dementia.

## **2. Language contact and language change**

The fairly widespread notion is that in situations of language contact and language change the modifications that can be observed in the linguistic system of one of these languages are entirely or in parts due to one language's encroaching on the other.

## **3. Universal Grammar (UG)**

The UG approach to language attrition is related to the regression hypothesis, since it also considers acquisitional factors. It is not based on an observable sequence of acquisition but on grammatical reasons for this sequence. This view on language acquisition and language attrition is based on Chomsky's notion of a UG which contains a set of fixed principles which are set during the acquisitional process.

## **4. Psycholinguistics**

The psycholinguistic model of language attrition augments the perspectives on language internal and acquisitional factors by taking into account features of processing and memory retrieval, dealing with more general psychological issues like the accessing and forgetting of information.

## **4. Linguistic Levels**

It is generally agreed that there is a cline of “borrowability” within the linguistic system; that lexical items are borrowed more easily than functional or grammatical ones.

### **4.1 Lexicon**

Where lexical items are concerned, “interferences” of several types can occur. This is a frequent feature in the discourse of bilinguals, especially with other bilingual interlocutors, and it is very doubtful whether simple code-switching can be considered evidence for attrition (Davies & Elder, 2006).

### **4.2 Morphology**

Where language attrition in the domain of morphology is concerned, it has been predicted that the attrited variety will exhibit an overall reduction in morphological complexity, resulting in a more analytical structure.

### **4.3 Syntax**

The assumption that word order is a domain which is to simplification processes in language attrition seems intuitively convincing: many languages offer their speakers the possibility to express what they want to say in structures with a variation in complexity

## **5. Sociolinguistic Factors**

### **5.1 Age at onset of attrition**

The “critical period” hypothesis for language acquisition in general and L2 acquisition in particular has been contested in some points; and today, the influence of age on second language acquisition is still very much in doubt. Where language attrition is affected by factor of age is the level of achievement at the onset of attrition.

### **5.2 Education**

In Jaspaert & Kroon’s study, education turned out to be the most important explanatory factor for language loss. They hypothesize that the reason for this influence might either be purely material , a higher level of education, or be linked to a higher familiarity with the written code and thus offering more chances for contact.

### **5.3 Gender**

The gender of the informants appears to be an important sociolinguistic variable. In a cultural context where women are not expected to work outside the home or to have ties outside their own cultural community, it would have to be expected that they maintain their native language to a higher degree than men.