Cross linguistic influence of the second language on the first
Written production of Iranian immigrants to Australia

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Abstract

As soon as a speaker becomes bilingual, the new language will very subtly influence the native one, even if it is not much used. This is how first language attrition may start. Most attrition studies deal with spoken language; however, as in writing people have more time to think and revise, written data is supposed to reflect language competence more clearly. In the present study the purpose is to investigate immigrants' first language attrition in written texts. Data was a corpus of 71,848 words taken from the weblogs of a number of Persian speaking immigrants to Australia that were written monthly up to the fiftieth month of their immigration. It included lexical, morphological, syntactic and semantic deviations of the native language of these immigrants. Their own written production two months before immigration is used as control. The result confirms the vulnerability of lexicon, as in previous research. There is a decreasing, and finally stabilized state in some cases of attrition; this may be explained by the acculturation phenomenon. Lots of interpersonal variations have been detected which may either be gender-related or a matter of personal preference. Hence, this study calls for further psycho-sociolinguistic investigations to explain the language attrition.
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1. Introduction

Language loss as multi-dimensional phenomenon (Unganer, 2014) has been searched from a variety of perspectives such as neurolinguistic, psycholinguistic and sociolinguistic (Seliger and Vago, 1991). It is related to various subjects including acculturation, assimilation, anomie and language death or extinction. First and second language attrition, not only covers the issue of language loss from different perspectives like age, motivation and attitudes, but also can be analyzed from the linguistic and theoretical aspects of language (Unganer, 2014).

1.1. Definition and process of first language attrition

The term 'first language attrition' refers to changes in a native language that has either fallen into disuse or is used alongside an environmental one (Schmid and Jarvis, 2014). In accordance with this definition, attrition is a process that is driven by two factors: (a) the presence, development and regular use of a second linguistic system, leading to crosslinguistic interference (CLI), competition and other effects associated with bilingualism, and (b) a decreased use of the attriting language, potentially leading to access problems (Schmid and Köpke, 2007).

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Many variables interact with each other to affect attrition in general. Köpke and Shmid (2004) believe that in studying attrition it is necessary to take into account factors such as the age at onset of L2 acquisition (simultaneous/early/late bilingual), age at onset of L1 attrition (pre-/post puberty), time since onset of attrition, level of education and attitudes. Additionally, context of use plays a significant role (Schmid and Jarvis, 2014).

Schmid (2011) provides an explanation for how languages affect each other. When a new language is learnt, the brain cannot 're-initialize', hence, the already known language(s) will affect the way the new one is leant and used. As a result, a foreign accent may subsist or the grammar of the language is probably used in such a way that marks the language user as a non-native. However, this impact is not unidirectional and the newly acquired knowledge may also impact back on the already known language(s), including the native language. This can be demonstrated in Fig. 1.

Therefore, Cook (2003) brings up the idea of language as super-system and multi-competence. Since the first language and the other language(s) are located in the same mind, they must form a language super-system at some level rather than be completely isolated systems. Multi-competence, then raised questions about the relationship between different languages in use.

Cook also proposes a continuum of separation, interconnection and integration of the two linguistic systems in the mind. The continuum does not necessarily apply to the whole language system, for instance a person's lexicon might be integrated, but the phonology can be separate. Nor does it necessarily affect all individuals in the same way. The continuum can be schematized as in Fig. 2.
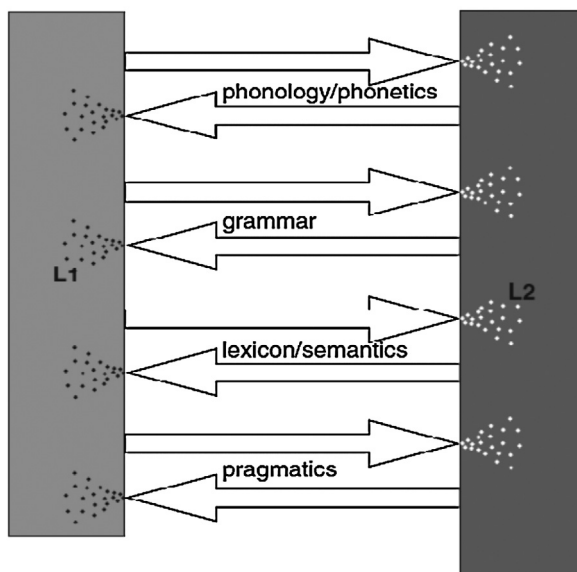

Fig. 1. An integrated view of cross-linguistic influence in bilingualism (Schmid, 2011:15).
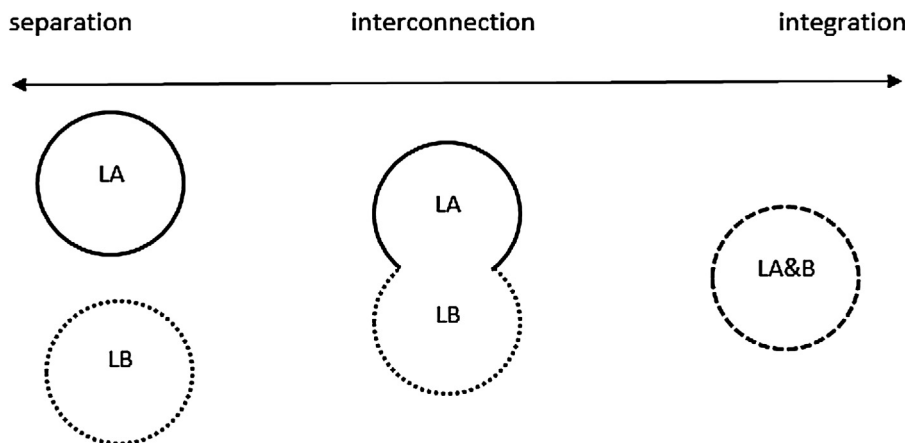

Fig. 2. Continuum of possible relations in multiple competence (Cook, 2003:9).