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# **ALAPSZAKOS SZAKDOLGOZAT**

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Anglisztika alapszak

Angol szakirány

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# ALAPSZAKOS SZAKDOLGOZAT

*Az anyanyelv használatának visszaszorulása kétnyelvű beszélőknél:  
A nem nyelvi tényezők hatása*

*First language attrition in bilingual speakers: The influence of  
non-linguistic factors*

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## **Abstract**

This thesis provides an overview of the most important non-linguistic factors having an influence on the first language (L1) attrition of emigrant bilingual speakers. By reviewing the literature, it can be posited that both bilingualism and language attrition are hard to define explicitly, because the proposed definitions to date are manifold. My investigation also demonstrates that among the extralinguistic aspects, age at the onset of emigration and length of residence have the greatest impact on the L1 attritional process. Apart from these background factors, however, individual patterns, such as attitude, motivation, or the speaker's aptitude for the language also play a crucial role. Examples from the narratives of long-term expatriates show that there is a close connection between L1 attrition and identity, too; thus, these migrants' perceptions and experiences are expounded, as well. Despite all the negative effects of forgetting a language, attrition studies point out that migrants can use a great number of methods to help their native tongue resist the deteriorating effects of attrition. Yet, there appears to be a factor without which all the attempts seem inapplicable. With these findings, I intend to contribute to and encourage further research into the relatively new field of first language attrition.

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

Bilingualism and language attrition are two widespread and closely related notions that have received considerable attention in the past few decades. Even in the case of monolinguals, it has long been recognised that the mother tongue occupies a dominant position in both the human mind and identity; with bilinguals, it is probably of even greater significance.

The major focus of this thesis is to investigate the phenomenon of first language (L1) attrition in the case of emigrant bilinguals who, by leaving their home country, left their mother tongue behind, as well. I intend to approach this task by clarifying what bilingualism is and who can be characterised as a bilingual person according to the present state of linguistic science. Attrition being the pivot of my paper, I will also discuss the concept of language loss. In the main part, I would like to concentrate on those factors that contribute to first language attrition in emigrant bilinguals. Since, however, considering every single aspect that could have an effect on the attritional process would take a fairly extensive study – if not more separate ones – I have decided to focus on the most crucial extralinguistic issues, such as age, length of residence, and motivation. I will also turn my attention to the question what influence first language attrition exerts on the identity of long-term expatriates. In addition, I am curious to learn what kind of language use is necessary to prevent or at least reduce language loss, so I attempt to examine how interactive and non-interactive L1 use can remedy the disintegration of the mother tongue.

The primary reason of writing this thesis was my general interest in bilingualism and bilinguality. In the world of multilingualism and mobility, I found it essential to know what our own mother tongue is likely to be exposed to when moving to – and perhaps settling down in – another country for a longer period of time. Furthermore, having bilingual friends struggling with L1 attrition was also part of my inspiration.

## 2. DEFINING BILINGUALISM

However prevalent the concept may seem, it is very difficult to define what makes someone bilingual. In the past decades, several suggestions have been proposed by researchers, but the definitions are rather diverse. For easier understanding, though, they could be placed on a continuum with one end indicating perfect mastery in both languages and the other presuming that minimal proficiency in the two languages is sufficient. Between the two extremes, several other definitions can be found. Therefore, we are faced with the question whether a bilingual should have a perfect, almost native-like competence in two languages or does it only mean using two linguistic codes on a regular basis?

In an early source, Braun (as cited in Haugen, 1987) adopts the view that bilingualism is the “active, completely equal mastery of two or more languages” (p. 14). This is probably the most common definition of bilingualism; the majority of people would probably use very similar words to describe it. According to recent statistics (Grosjean, 2010), however, today nearly half of the world’s population is bilingual. Is it possible that so many people have such a high level of proficiency in two languages and are able to use them actively? Braun’s definition, it seems, is confined to only *perfect bilinguals*, that is speakers having constant, fully-developed competence in two languages – an instance that, one must admit, is very rare. Contrary to Braun’s view, Macnamara (as cited in Hamers & Blanc, 1989) states that a bilingual person is someone “who possesses a minimal competence in one of the four language skills, i.e. listening comprehension, speaking, reading and writing in a language other than his mother tongue” (p. 6). This approach indicates the other extreme of the scale, implying that being bilingual means having only a limited command in the components of a language.

Hamers and Blanc (1989), however, raise a number of problems concerning these formulations. On the one hand, they mention the lack of precision in defining native-like



competence, which can vary in a monolingual community, as well. What is meant by minimal competence in the language skills is not clarified, either. Some people possess very good skills in all the components, while others have only a rudimentary knowledge of a second language (L2). Can we call both groups of people bilinguals? They also question the structure of languages. If two languages are structurally very similar, how can we know whether the speaker is not just rephrasing the structure of the L1 when producing speech in the L2? On the other hand, Hamers and Blanc (1989) note that the definitions listed above refer merely to one dimension of bilingualism, the level of proficiency, and tend to ignore all non-linguistic dimensions of the phenomenon; however, bilingualism is a multi-dimensional one.

A completely different classification of bilingualism is suggested by Grosjean (1982) who claims that a bilingual speaker is characterised by “the regular use of two or more languages” (p. 1). According to him, earlier definitions were too broad and considered bilingualism from a monolingual perspective. Moreover, he highlights that they were based on the false presupposition that a bilingual is composed of two monolinguals.

As we can see, conflicting opinions have been offered about what characterises a bilingual speaker. I would agree with Grosjean’s suggestion, as the other definitions appear to be a bit too extreme and exclude from the description of bilingualism a number of people we would otherwise call bilinguals. Since the focus of my thesis is on emigrant bilinguals, Grosjean’s (1982) definition seems to be the proper one that should be employed in the case of expatriates. People arriving in a new language environment do not necessarily reach high levels of proficiency in every field of the language. They may be able to speak fluently or can be very articulate, but they might make mistakes in grammar or writing. On the basis of these deliberations, I have decided that in this thesis I will use the label *bilingualism* as a phenomenon characterised by the habitual use of more than one languages of an individual.

### 3. LANGUAGE ATTRITION

#### 3.1 WHAT IS ATTRITION?

Similarly to bilingualism, language attrition is a concept that is hard to define explicitly. As Schmid (2011) points out, it is almost impossible to find a clear and visible line and declare that attrition begins if the speaker is above that certain threshold. In terms of emigrant bilinguals, for instance, should we consider the length of time and declare that attrition is experienced after ten years or can we state that someone having a foreign accent or making a particular number of errors is an attriter and someone who does not is a non-attriter? These factors are all salient features that need to be taken into account; nevertheless, finding a clear-cut definition is a difficult task.

According to Kormos and Csölle (2004), language attrition is also called language loss and means “the loss of linguistic abilities” (p. 101). This seems to be a general wording of the term, and it is not clear what exactly is meant by abilities – whether it is proficiency or relates to only one of the skills of language. What *can* be seen, however, is the fact that attrition refers to some kind of change in the linguistic system of the speaker. This is what Köpke and Schmid (2009) emphasise, especially referring to the mother tongue. They claim that first language attrition is interpreted as an alteration in the native language system of the bilingual who is using a second language more frequently than the L1. Due to the dominance of the L2, the L1 gradually begins to weaken and becomes impoverished. It is also important to stress that attrition can manifest itself at all levels of a language, including phonetics, morphology, or the lexicon.

The reasons why attrition takes place can be various. Köpke and Schmid (2009) proposed two possible causes; the first being the presence and the improvement of the second language. As explained above, this development later leads to the eventual dominance of the L2 in the linguistic system of the bilingual. This is what they referred to as “externally

induced change” (p. 211). The other aspect causing first language attrition is described from the perspective of the mother tongue. The excessive use of the L2 obviously involves a decline in the use of the L1. This is described as “internally induced language change” (p. 211).

### 3.2 TYPES OF ATTRITION

In order to get a comprehensive picture of what attrition is, we also need to familiarise ourselves with the different categories of the phenomenon. Several suggestions have been made to offer a classification of language attrition; however, probably the most frequently cited division is the one attributed to van Els (as cited in Köpke & Schmid, 2004), presented in Table 1.

Table 1

*The ‘van Els taxonomy’*

LANGUAGE LOST	LANGUAGE ENVIRONMENT	
	L1	L2
L1	dialect loss or aphasia	L1 attrition of emigrants
L2	foreign language loss	language reversion (aging)

Depending on what language is lost and in what environment, we can distinguish four types of attrition, of which, according to Köpke and Schmid (2004) dialect loss and reversion are of secondary interest in linguistic research; firstly, because they raise several problems, such as deciding whether dialect loss is closer to language shift than to language attrition. Secondly, language reversion in bilinguals is problematic to be examined separately from that

in elderly monolingual speakers. However, the taxonomy is still considered a landmark in the study of language attrition.

#### **4. THE CONNECTION BETWEEN BILINGUALISM AND ATTRITION**

Before moving on to the influence of non-linguistic factors, however, it is worth observing the relationship between the above discussed notions, and finding an answer to the question whether attrition happens to those having a particularly high L2 competence, or it is perceived by all bilinguals.

In the past, researches presumed that attrition is only experienced by bilinguals meeting Braun's definition (as cited in Haugen, 1987), that is people with a complete mastery in both languages. Nevertheless, as Schmid (2011) points out, L2 influence can manifest itself in the L1 as soon as a person becomes bilingual; thus, all bilinguals can be supposed to encounter attrition – the point is that some of them show easily perceptible signs of it while others do not.

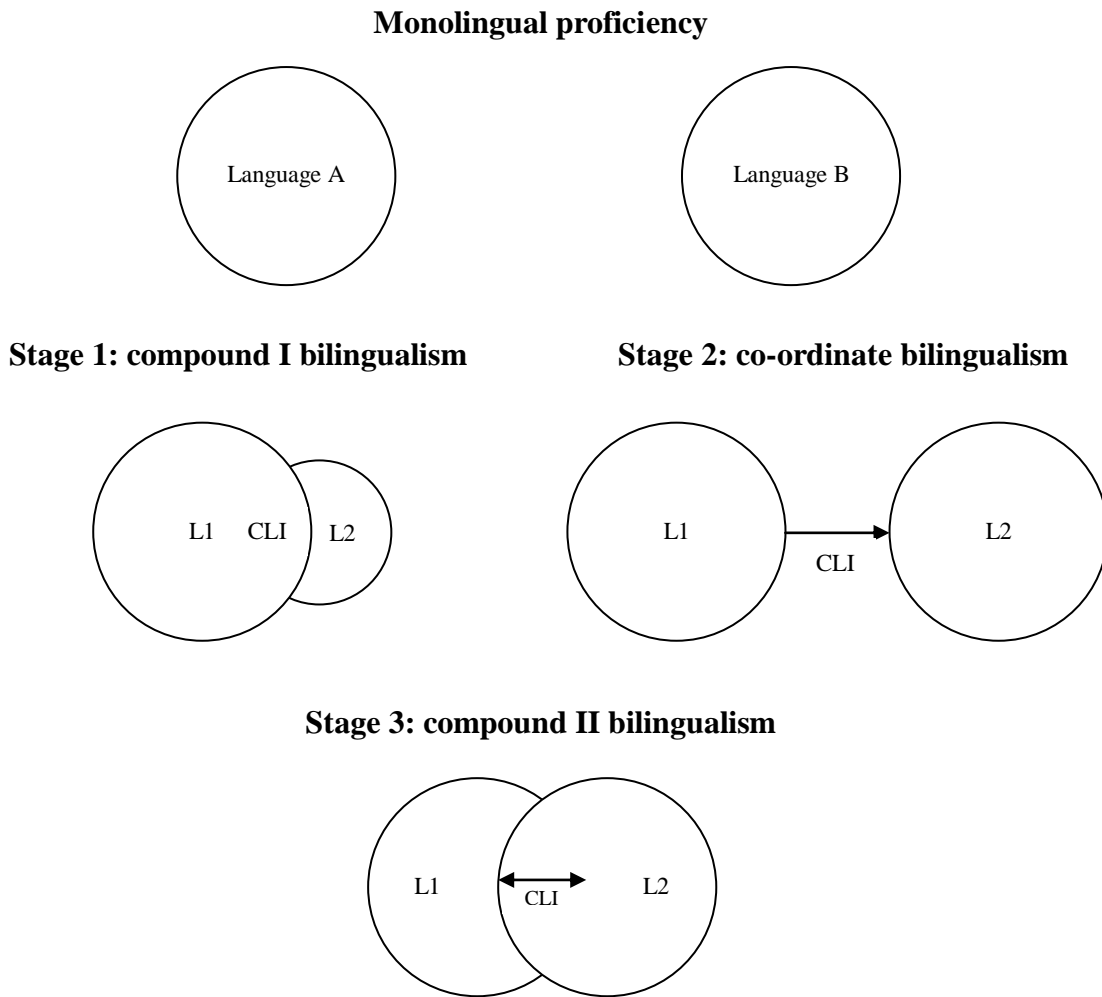
While investigating the link between bilingualism and attrition, Seliger and Vago (as cited in Schmid, 2011) have set up a clearly understandable model of bilingual development, outlining three stages. Their representation is based on a previous model that supported the idea of linguistic transfer occurring from the prevailing language to the weaker. They labelled the first stage as *compound I bilingualism*, which means that the L2 is still insufficient, so speakers use the L1 to compensate for their lack of knowledge and this becomes the source of influence. The next stage is called *co-ordinate bilingualism*, suggesting that the two linguistic codes are separated and can improve irrespectively of one another. Finally, the last stage is *compound II bilingualism*, in which the process of language attrition might be experienced. According to Seliger and Vago's explanation (as cited in Schmid, 2011), owing to the good

proficiency in the L2, the two linguistic systems join again and the linguistic interference is inverted. These three stages of the model are delineated in Figure 1.

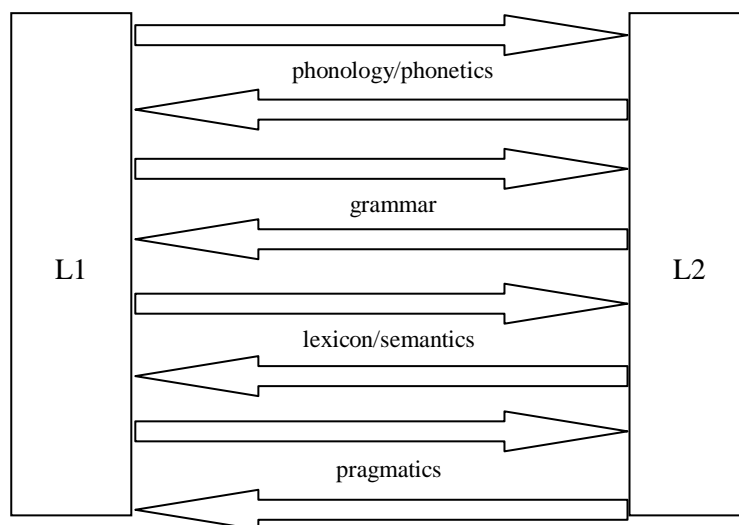
Despite the clarity of the model, Schmid (2011) notes that the idea of two completely separate language systems in one mind is not supported by the findings of psycholinguistics and neurolinguistics. Instead, as Cook (as cited in Schmid, 2011) points out, the two languages “must form a language super-system at some level, rather than be completely isolated systems” (p. 13). As shown in Figure 2, this super-system allows the speaker to change and mingle the languages, but also to set them apart and use them independently from each other.

Although the model has been specified, following the reasoning of Schmid (2011), one final significant remark should be made. Not only do emigrant bilinguals use their new, second language more frequently than their mother tongue, but the available L1 input is also reduced for them. Therefore, we can assume that some changes in their linguistic system are not the results of cross-linguistic influence but due to minimal exposure to the mother tongue.

So far I have elaborated on the fundamental notions of bilingualism and language attrition – with more attention to the loss of one’s mother tongue – and attempted to collate the different definitions on account of providing a clearer idea of these well-known concepts. Then, I also examined the relationship between the two processes. In what follows, I am going to take a look at those factors that have the greatest relevance to the first language attrition of emigrant bilinguals.



*Figure 1.* The illustration of bilingual development suggested by Seliger and Vago (as cited in Schmid, 2011, p. 14).



*Figure 2.* The system of cross-linguistic influence in bilingualism (Schmid, 2011, p. 15).

## **5. EXTRALINGUISTIC FACTORS INFLUENCING FIRST LANGUAGE**

### **ATTRITION**

As we have seen, language attrition is a fairly complex process that is usually caused by more than one factor. Also, it is generally acknowledged in the literature that attrition is definitely not a static but a constantly changing procedure, most often taking place over years or decades. The underlying cause for its intricacy is that – especially in the case of emigrants – it is influenced by various factors. Therefore, I wish to look at what background and personal aspects contribute to the deterioration of emigrant bilinguals' native tongue to the greatest degree. For this task, I have decided to use the latest findings of Schmid (2011) and Bylund, Abrahamsson, and Hyltenstam (2009), some of the most influential researchers of language attrition.

#### **5.1 BACKGROUND ASPECTS**

##### **5.1.1 Age at the beginning of emigration**

The effect of age has long been in the centre of attention within the field of applied linguistics. It is considered an important variable in second language acquisition (SLA); however, its role cannot be ignored with respect to language attrition, either.

When investigating the role of age in SLA, researchers have set up a prominent theory, namely, the Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH). According to Lenneberg (as cited in Nikolov, 2000), it means that “there is a period during which learners can acquire a second language easily and achieve native-speaker competence, but after this period second language acquisition (SLA) becomes more difficult and is rarely entirely successful” (p. 109). This certain period is said to be found in early childhood. The existence and significance of the CPH were supported in several ways, including biological, cognitive, and affective/social-psychological evidence. Later, however, the original hypothesis was reformulated, and it was

found that actually there are a number of critical periods for different aspects of language acquisition. Nevertheless, age has always been found to have an effect. Therefore, we can presume with good reason that the age at which emigrants move into a new language environment has an impact on the attritional process.

The attempt to prove this, however, is met by a major obstacle: studies investigating the age factor in L1 attrition are very rare. As Schmid (2011) points out, although a great deal of research has been carried out on the role of age as a key factor within individual differences in second language acquisition across all age spans, there seem to be very few investigations with respect to attrition. Probably the most important study to have been conducted recently is the one carried out by Bylund (as cited in Schmid, 2011). His subjects were Spanish native speakers who emigrated to Sweden between the ages of 1 and 19. He concluded that the mother tongue becomes fixed at the age of about 12. If migration takes place before that age, chances are that the linguistic system of the mother tongue weakens and, in the extreme, can be lost completely; while the L1 of speakers older than 12 at the time of emigration is resistant to attrition. If this is so, then as Schmid (2011) notes, we need to observe an interesting relationship between these findings and the assumption of the CPH. While the acquisition of a second language is most successful at early ages, this is also the period which threatens to bring about attrition in the L1 system. If the onset of emigration occurs later in life, the detrimental change in the language will be less drastic and more eliminable.

Before considering further aspects, though, Schmid (2011) suggests making an important distinction here. Since there is a major dissimilarity in the language proficiency of pre- and post-puberty migrants, we should refer to them differently. Speakers born to families maintaining their own language (and teaching it to their children) should be called *heritage speakers*, whereas pre-puberty migrants *incomplete learners* or *incomplete acquirers*. It is



only speakers moving to another country after the age of 12 who can be referred to as *L1 attriters*.

### **5.1.2 Language reversion in elderly migrants**

Among the few available studies on first language attrition, the above mentioned work may be one of the few exceptions focusing on young adults, as the majority of studies deal with people who are quite old – around the age of 60 – and are known to have been immigrants for a fairly long time. Following the reasoning of Schmid (2011), this has practical reasons: analysts seek volunteers who can provide sufficient amount of experience, be it linguistic, life, or psychological experience. Most of these people were adults when they left the home country and have been living in the new environment for a long time; thus, their language can be supposed to have changed over the years. Also, out of work and somewhat withdrawn from social life, older people are prone to be preoccupied with nostalgic memories and think back to the original culture they left behind. As a result, a number of elder migrants report that they witness a kind of reversion in language dominance. Reversing the process of attrition, their first language gradually becomes stronger, they use it more and more frequently, some even reaching a point where they cannot communicate with their own children if they are not proficient in their parents' L1.

### **5.1.3 Length of residence**

As outlined above, L1 attrition is a constantly altering process; at some point migrants may experience it as a harsh intruder into their linguistic systems, at other points they might not feel the deterioration of their L1. These perceptions are sensed over a longer period of time; therefore, length of residence is another essential factor to be considered. Nevertheless,

this issue seems to be reminiscent of that of the age factor, as experimental findings providing substantial evidence are very rare.

If someone attempts to find a correlation between the length of residence and L1 attrition, they might suppose that the longer someone lives in a foreign environment the more their L1 weakens. The few studies available, however, often argue otherwise. Beganovic's study (as cited in Schmid, 2011), for instance, revealed that the L2 had a more profound effect on the L1 in the case of migrants with less than a five-year-residence than on those who had been living in the new environment for twelve years. With reference to this, there are findings implying that attrition takes place during the first ten years, in the period between five and ten years, to be more precise. Huls and van de Mond's research (as cited in Schmid, 2011) into the language use of two Turkish families in the Netherlands even suggested a reversal of language dominance after fifteen years. Moreover, it has also been found that those speakers who are able to practice and maintain their L1 will remain stable in the long run.

Based on the findings discussed above, it can be seen that among the background factors contributing to L1 attrition, age seems to have the highest priority. Not only has it been an essential variable in individual learner differences in SLA, but it has also become an important predictor of L1 attrition in emigrant bilinguals, as well. As we have noticed, the period of adolescence is such a powerful watershed that it even decides upon whom we can call an attriter: the term attrition can only be applied to post-puberty migrants; bilingual migrants outside this "category" are heritage speakers or incomplete acquirers. Yet, owing to the lack of sufficient amount of evidence in this respect, we cannot assert everything in full conviction; we have to remain sceptical and this seems to be the case with some other factors, too. For instance, the separation of age and length of residence can be quite problematic, since the earlier one emigrates, the longer time they spend in the target country. Consequently, the two variables are very much connected and can easily be confounded. The question of old age

and length of residence is thus far from being settled, room is still available for future investigations.

## **5.2 INDIVIDUAL PERSONALITY ASPECTS**

### **5.2.1 Problems of investigation**

It is a widely held belief among investigators that one's attitude, motivation, and affiliation are important determinants of the achievement in a second or foreign language (Schmid & Dusseldorp, 2010) – some studies even maintain that these factors have the greatest relevance to the ultimate success in learning a language. However, the problem we have to face – again – is that not much research has been conducted on to what extent these aspects influence L1 attrition. Besides, as Schmid (2011) reveals, there are two major methodological problems researchers have to take into consideration. Firstly, language attrition is a process that is likely to change in one's lifetime. It is characterised by a constant flux, and it might take years until it exerts its influence on the linguistic system of the speaker. Similarly, the attitudes and the disposition of a person are prone to change over the years, too. A formerly disinclined expatriate may take to their new environment, or a migrant who at first could completely accept their new situation might become preoccupied with late memories and nostalgia for the home country. Secondly, attitudes and identities are factors that cannot be measured directly or observed in themselves. Although tests investigating migrants' characters do exist, it is only through interviews and self-reports that one can receive a fairly reliable picture about one's attitudes. However, this method still remains challenging since interview subjects are often afraid of sharing their actual thoughts and experiences because they fear they might say something improper or something which will later be the unfortunate bases of judgements made about them.

As we can see, findings of how attitudes and identities contribute to the attritional process are rare and should be treated with caution. It must be borne in mind that these factors fluctuate in time and self-reports might be unreliable.

### **5.2.2 Attitude and motivation**

Although it has been recognised that factors such as motivation, attitudes, and identities can have a constructive impact on the development of a language, for the sake of better understanding, it might turn out to be useful to examine whether the reverse is also true. Schmid (2011) poses the question that if making strenuous efforts to learn a language or to become a member of a community helps acquisition, can the rejection of the language or the host community increase attrition? In order to reply to this question, it is not enough to examine one particular group of people, since some groups as social entities can have specific features and common traits that might not be true for other groups. For complete comprehension of how such factors influence L1 attrition, different groups of expatriates should be investigated in a similar environment. Such a study has been conducted by Schmid (2011) with two speakers, Gertrud U. and Albert L., who left Germany for England in the 1930-40s.

As German Jews, they escaped from Germany without their parents at the age of 13. Gertrud U. moved from one foster family to the other, while Albert L. had to go to a boarding school. One can hardly imagine how difficult and fearful these conditions might have been, and how lonely they could have felt. After the WW II broke out, however, their situation got even worse: Albert L. was sent to a labour camp, whereas Gertrud U., being a female, remained with her “family” and was disdained by nearly everyone around her; firstly because she was German, and secondly because it was feared that the foster family might need to face the consequences of offering refuge to a Jew.

No wonder that Gertrud U., having had to experience this serious trauma at an early age, decided to give up her German identity and break off all relations with her home country. No longer was she interested in the German culture, people, or the language. Interestingly, Albert L. did not feel the same way. The reason for this may be his different character or personality; nevertheless, it is more probable that the year of emigration serves as an explanation. Gertrud U. emigrated in 1939, just before the WW II broke out, while Albert L. left Germany in 1934, that is quite at the beginning of the new Nazi regime. By doing so, he did not have to experience the feeling of inferiority or segregation the way as, for instance, Gertrude U. did. She was not allowed to attend the public school, talk to strangers or to her own family members because they were afraid of being eavesdropped.

These two similar yet different paths of life present themselves in the language use of the two migrants. As per the reports of Schmid (2011), Gertrud U. has serious difficulties expressing herself in German, whereas Albert L. could maintain an amazing level of German proficiency even after sixty years of emigration and does not show any serious signs of attrition. With this in mind, the following comment can be made about attitude and motivation as essential variables in L1 attrition: they are greatly person-dependent and dynamic in nature, that is they are very likely to be influenced by life experiences. Based on the example above, we can see how easily childhood traumas and negative incidents in someone's life can accelerate the L1 attritional process.

### **5.2.3 Aptitude and L1 attrition**

As we could observe, variables, such as attitude and motivation play a decisive role in L1 attrition. However, the fact that these factors might change in the course of time cannot be stressed enough. In the last couple of years, researchers turned their attention to another vital individual factor that is said to be rather stable: language aptitude. Just like in the case of age,

aptitude has been studied mostly within the field of SLA and recognised as a highly important forecaster of language achievement. According to Carroll's definition (as cited in Ellis, 1994), language aptitude is the "capacity that enhances the rate and ease of learning" of a second language (p. 495). Being a key factor in the success of learning a foreign language, Bylund et al. (2009) suggested that a low level of language aptitude therefore might have negative effects on L1 skills.

In their study conducted on 25 pre-puberty emigrant bilinguals, the results confirmed this assumption. They found that a person with a high level of aptitude does not attrite to the extent as someone with a lower level of aptitude does. As for the why of these findings, they proposed that the degree of L1 contact should be investigated, because in order to keep up good L1 proficiency, a speaker must have some kind of contact with the language itself. They suggested that the role of aptitude in L1 attrition is thus primarily connected with the amount of L1 contact to the effect that someone with a high degree of aptitude does not depend upon permanent L1 input of a considerable quantity. That is to say, speakers with low levels of language aptitude have to wrestle with L1 attrition more remarkably.

After drawing the above mentioned conclusions, however, Bylund et al. (2009) also attempted find out to what degree language aptitude can make up for decreased L1 contact. Is it possible that without any contact with the mother tongue, for instance, a reasonable level of proficiency can be retained? Although the results did not show unequivocally, it is hypothesised that in order to overcome attrition, an above-average level of aptitude is needed. As regards the question pertaining to zero L1 contact, some degree of contact with the first language was found to be necessary.

Based on the findings above, we can say that language aptitude seems to be a useful variable in the study of first language attrition; however, the authors of the investigation stress

that further examination of the topic is encouraged in order to gain more valuable insights into the influence of language aptitude on L1 attrition.

In this part of my thesis, I attempted to look at those extralinguistic factors that exert influence on and play a crucial role in the first language attrition of expatriates. In the next section, I intend to examine what impact the attritional process has on the identity of emigrant bilinguals as well as how the attritional process can be reduced or even prevented.

## **6. FIRST LANGUAGE ATTRITION AND IDENTITY**

Leaving behind the home country and moving to another environment are never easy; one has to adjust to different conditions, to people with different mindsets, and in most cases to a completely new language. After living abroad for several years, it is very likely that one's way of thinking, mentality, or whole identity begins to change. Therefore, we might ask the question: what sort of experience is this? Can the necessity of belonging to another people be accepted easily or does it take years of constant anguish to fully acculturate in the new environment? More importantly for us, how do emigrant bilinguals see the experience of first language attrition?

It is generally accepted among analysts that language can be seen as an integral part of our identity. Prescher (2007) states that "we use it to construct, tell, and retell our life-stories" (p. 193). However, the case of expatriates seems a bit complicated as they use two competing languages, and thus, connect some memories and emotions to the L1 and some to the L2. A few researchers also advocate that bilinguals use different self-concepts, depending on which language they use. The question under discussion is to what degree this phenomenon influences one's identity. Prescher (2007) interviewed ten male and ten female adult emigrants speaking German L1 and Dutch L2 who had been living in the Netherlands for

more than ten years. The interviews produced remarkable results and provided a picture of how their identities were formed by moving to another language environment.

To begin with, some of the participants felt very lonely at first and described their arrival in the target country as arriving in “no-man’s land”:

Because, what I myself experienced, you just arrive in no-man’s land. You are in a no-man’s land because you don’t know where you are anymore, what you are doing and, yes, which language you are actually speaking. Which language you – well, to express your feelings can be difficult, sometimes. (*LE, m, 33, 12 years in NL*) (Prescher, 2007, p. 199)

Answers to where these speakers feel at home were various; the majority reported that they felt like a foreigner in Germany. Nevertheless, nearly all of them wished to blend the cultures, the languages, and the experiences they had into one. The means to achieve this were also diverse. One interviewee, for example, turned to psychotherapy to accomplish integration:

And then, during group therapy, I re-enacted my whole youth in Dutch. (...) I discussed the problems I had, which were very German, of course, and then I repeated them in Dutch, I repeated them as it were. And through therapy it came together, again. (...) (*SH, f, 49, 25 years in NL*) (Prescher, 2007, p. 200)

Prescher (2007) emphasises that the findings should not be generalised since the migrants she examined are just one group of people. Also, we need to remember that attrition is a process which does not occur in an instant. It is a long procedure taking place at different rates in different people, so variation can be enormous. However, there seems to be a consensus on how long-term migrants usually behave in their new environment. Most people



want to be part of the community as soon as possible and often experience a kind of personality loss in the first few years after emigration. Then, they usually get confused which language they should use and what their true self is. Some of the informants in Prescher's study (2007) wonderfully epitomise these uncertainties: "I didn't know what my real language was" (p. 201), "I don't know which identity I have anymore" (p. 201). Yet, there exists another type of attitude, which is the complete rejection of the new language and culture, making no attempt at adjusting to altered circumstances. Behind this reluctant stance, there might be several reasons: the inability to accept the new situation, the negative attitude of the environment, or the negative attitude of the migrants towards the guest community, to mention but a few.

Nevertheless, Prescher (2007) highlights that after many years of emigration, long-term migrants tend to feel positive about their roots, their culture, and their mother tongue, as well. The longer they stay in the target country, the more they wish to be part of their original culture, speak their first language, and regain their original identities. It should be noted that the phenomenon of language reversion and nostalgia have already been described in connection with the age factor in elderly migrants, too, so we may conclude that these findings corroborate those assumptions.

## **7. REDUCING OR PREVENTING FIRST LANGUAGE ATTRITION**

Having looked at the factors accelerating L1 attrition and its influence on the speaker's attitude and identity respectively, another question might arise: how can these bilinguals prevent or at least reduce the disintegration of their mother tongue? What should they do to lessen or, if possible, to stop the attritional process?

It is a rather universal experience that if a skill is not practiced, it will become impoverished, and we cease to be able to perform it satisfactorily. It is therefore reasonable to presume that the same is true for language use. Speakers who carry on speaking the language will remain proficient in it, while those who do not will most probably forget it. As Schmid (2011) points out, the main supposition of attrition research is that attrition is liable to occur if there is no contact with the language, whereas using the L1 on a regular basis helps maintain it. Since these statements are rather vague and determining what ‘regular’ means seems fairly opaque, it is worth differentiating two types of language use, as proposed by Schmid (2011).

### **7.1 INTERACTIVE LANGUAGE USE**

As its name suggests, this kind of language use involves interaction, both in spoken and written ways of communication. Within this category, however, it is important to discriminate between formal and informal language uses. Code switching is a phenomenon often encountered by bilingual people who tend to change from one language to the other while talking. Schmid (2011) notes that in informal situations, there is considerably more code switching than in formal settings, because at work or under serious conditions, speakers pay more attention to their language use and deliberately avoid switching codes. Thus, it seems that in informal conversations there is a bigger chance that the speaker’s both languages will be used as opposed to formal situations where – especially when the conversation is running in the L2, of course – the L1 is more likely to deteriorate. Following this, however, an arising question should be answered. What if the speaker has very few contacts in their L1? Grosjean and Py (as cited in Schmid, 2011) state that in the case of a restricted number of L1 contacts, the signs of attrition may manifest themselves quite early, regardless of probably those being casual acquaintances. In contrast, bilinguals socialising with people sharing the same L1 have a better chance to maintain their mother tongue either

by talking in the L1 or by means of continuous code-switching. The key in this case, it may be inferred, is the number of contact in the first language.

## **7.2 NON-INTERACTIVE LANGUAGE USE**

Apart from engaging in conversations, language use takes place via other types of media, too, such as with the help of books or the television. The main issue in this respect is whether the use of non-interactive input can help attriters maintain their L1 level in the long run. Applying the formula proposed by Krashen as part of his Input Hypothesis (as cited in Kormos & Csölle, 2004), our question is that if reading books or watching television in the L1 can prevent bilingual migrants from going down from level  $i$  to  $i-1$ . According to Schmid (2011), language learners with high levels of competence in a language can benefit from comprehensible input more than those having a rudimentary knowledge in the given language. Thus, she suggests that since the level of attriters, specifically in the first few years of migration, is the highest within the scope of SLA standards, they can make use of this sort of input more than L2 learners. Yet some methodological problems need to be mentioned. Putting the effect of these kinds of media under investigation is a rather challenging task because media is a rapidly developing domain. A few decades ago, the field of the electronic media and the world of the Internet were a 'terra incognita' to most people, while today, finding a household without Internet access would be a demanding mission. It is very difficult, thus, to compare and contrast the situation of migrants 50 years ago with that of recently emigrated individuals.

## **7.3 THE INDISPENSABLE "INGREDIENT"**

Before rounding off this section, it is worth drawing attention to Schmid's (2011) suggestion. Even in the case of SLA, a further factor has been found to have prominent effect

on the successful outcome of the learning process, namely, willingness. It is only motivated and resolute learners who have the best chances of learning a foreign language well. “Where there is a will, there is a way” – goes the English proverb, which, in spite of sounding a cliché, have great relevance in this matter. A parallel can easily be drawn between the role of willingness in SLA and in language attrition. If a speaker does want to maintain the proficiency of their first language and is ready to make every effort for it, they will very likely be more successful than those having little motivation.

In summary, the number of contacts in the L1, the exposure to non-interactive uses of language, and the speaker’s inclination are all fundamental elements in reducing – if not preventing – first language attrition.

## **8. CONCLUSION**

In this present thesis, I have made an attempt at investigating the influence of non-linguistic factors on the first language attrition of emigrant bilingual speakers. First and foremost, I had a look at what characterises a bilingual person and how the process of language attrition can be defined. Several contradicting definitions are offered by different researchers, that is why I found it important to choose one wording first, which can be applied to the case of expatriates (Grosjean, 1982). It has also been observed that language attrition is a process encountered by all bilinguals due to L2 influence and the reduced contact with the L1.

As for the background and individual aspects, there seem to be a number of factors having an impact on L1 attrition. Among these, age at the beginning of emigration plays a central part and so does the length of residence in the guest country. One’s attitude and motivation also contribute to the phenomenon to a great extent. As we could witness in the

case of Gertrud U. (Schmid, 2011), childhood traumas or other negative experiences are likely to accelerate L1 deterioration. Following this, it seems that not only the speaker's language use is involved but their identity, as well: moving to a new environment for a longer period of time nearly always exerts its influence on one's character. Using the mother tongue regularly either interactively or passively, however, can help the native language become less vulnerable to the influence of the L2 and the lack of L1 input.

Having discussed all the variables mentioned above, it appeared to me that the different factors do not work alone in the deterioration of the L1 but are somewhat intertwined. As it could be seen in the case of age and length of residence, for instance, it is often complicated to set such aspects apart as there is interplay between them, so they need to be treated carefully. Besides, the tempo of L1 attrition should also be noted. As it has been pointed out, the change in the language system does not take place spasmodically; it may take years or decades until some kind of alteration is witnessed. This point gains even more significance if we examine studies conducted on young expatriates who have been migrants for only a limited time. In the same way, variables such as attitude, motivation, or someone's identity are not firm factors remaining stable for a lifetime. They are rather characterised by a constant fluctuation and can change even from day to day. Therefore, when dealing with factors related to one's personality, the potential flux should always be borne in mind. Moreover, the variation among speakers must be taken into consideration, too. Since motivation and attitude are human factors, the findings are strongly person-dependent. One particular circumstance may induce severe confusion in the identity of one speaker, while another migrant might tackle the same problem with the utmost ease.

The issue of diminishing L1 attrition is also intriguing. There is a plethora of methods what migrants can use to maintain a high level of proficiency in their first language from attending clubs and simply talking in the L1 to reading the newspaper or watching a film.

Thus, whether the speaker's L1 weakens or remains resistant appears to depend mostly on the speaker and their willingness.

Given that the number of bilinguals is increasing, language attrition of any kind is a phenomenon the investigation of which should be encouraged. My biggest difficulty while writing this thesis was the lack of ample evidence in the examination of the various aspects. The body of available data on the non-linguistic factors influencing first language attrition in particular is relatively rare; consequently, further research into the whys and hows of the issue is needed. By conducting new studies and making novel explorations, we could have a deeper understanding of both language attrition and bilingualism.

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