**Bridging the gap between selective and non-selective L1 attrition:   
the role of L1-L2 structural (dis)similarity**

Laura Domínguez  
University of Southampton

Schmid and Kӧpke’s (2017; henceforth S&K) keynote article highlights a fundamental contribution to L1 attrition research in that it can further develop our understanding of the nature of the human language faculty. S&K make the compelling case that existing theoretical approaches to second language acquisition can be applied to the L1 attrition context, but the question remains to what extent these theoretical models fully account for the two types of attrition which S&K argue for. The two types are, first, attrition affecting computational resources (e.g., lower levels of activation of the L1 and crosslinguistic competition) due to cognitive pressures, and, second, a type of selective attrition affecting the representation of certain linguistic structures (e.g., restructuring of L1 morphosyntactic properties). Note that the feature reassembly approach (Lardiere, 2009), as discussed in this article, can only really account for cases of selective attrition affecting L1 representations. These are cases in which bilingual speakers are faced with input from two languages which share the same set of formal features, although some of these may be encoded differently in the lexicon. As S&K point out, there is reasonable evidence to suggest that feature reassembly can explain the type of attrition which affects L1 representations. However, this explanation would leave cases of attrition affecting processing, as argued for by the authors, unexplained. This is a non-trivial question as it highlights the difficulties of reconciling these two types of attrition under one single theoretical model of language acquisition/attrition.

S&K claim that L1 processing is compromised by the early and continuous coactivation of the two languages in the mind of bilingual speakers, but whether this is the first step towards changes in L1 morphosyntax requires closer examination. After all, if all bilingual speakers are L1 attriters, as S&K argue, one might wonder why changes in L1 syntactic structures (that is, changes in L1 representations, and not just processing problems) are so rarely found in the L1 attrition literature. The lack of robust evidence for widespread syntactic attrition is congruent with traditional generative models of language and language acquisition: once parameters are set during child language acquisition, they are set for life. More recent Minimalist accounts which focus on how syntactic features are represented, bundled together and assembled onto functional categories, can account for cross-linguistic variation (i.e., what the field regarded as parameters in the traditional sense) in a straightforward manner. This theoretical shift allows for the possibility that adult grammars (i.e., how features are bundled and encoded in the lexicon) can be altered through a speaker’s lifespan, for example when speakers are faced with linguistic input which contains evidence of different feature bundles (as it is the case of attriters).

However, it is important to highlight that some linguistic conditions need to be met for change (i.e., L1 feature-reassembly) to take place. That is, L1 restructuring, although possible under a generative (Minimalist) model, is still expected to be quite restricted. For example, studies on the status of null and overt subjects in adult Spanish-English bilinguals have reported conflicting results with regards to native syntactic attrition in this area. On the one hand, some studies have shown that bilingual speakers use Spanish overt pronouns (Lipski, 1996; Satterfield, 2003; Otheguy & Zentella, 2007; Otheguy, Zentella & Livert, 2007; Shin & Otheguy, 2009) and null subjects (Domínguez, 2013; Shin & Otheguy, 2005; Silva-Corvalán, 1994) differently to monolingual Spanish speakers. However, changes were mainly found in the grammars of Spanish speakers who were born in the country where both languages were spoken (in this case, the US¸ see Silva-Corvalán, 1994; Flores-Ferrán, 2004; Shin & Otheguy, 2005, 2009), whereas changes were not observed for speakers who had been born in a Spanish speaking country and had recently arrived in the USA (see Flores-Ferrán, 2004; Shin & Otheguy, 2005a). In Domínguez (2013), I showed that changes affecting the use of null and postverbal subjects in the grammars of L1 Spanish speakers who were exposed to English as adults were only found in the grammars of bilingual speakers who migrated from Cuba to Miami where they continued to use Spanish on a regular basis. In contrast, no clear changes were found for Spanish speakers who migrated to the United Kingdom (UK) and had limited contact with other Spanish speakers (these bilingual speakers use mostly English in their everyday life now). It seems difficult to account for this result on the basis of the cognitive pressure/demand resulting from the coactivation of the two languages alone, and it is likely that other factors, such as language ability, dominance, and proficiency could also be at play. Note that this has been argued for in studies examining the effects of coactivation as well (see Sanoudaki & Thierry, 2015).

The crucial factor which seems to be missing in S&K’s discussions is the (dis)similarity between L1-L2 structures and its effect on the restructuring of L1 features. This factor is clearly applicable to the bilinguals in Miami in the Domínguez (2013) study as these speakers can be regarded as bi-dialectal: in Miami they are exposed to two varieties of Spanish (Caribbean and Mainland) with different grammatical properties which give raise to differences in the realisation of null and postverbal subjects (see Domínguez & Hicks, 2016). In contrast, the Spanish speakers in the UK, who show no signs of the same type of attrition, were never exposed to a different variety of Spanish. In Domínguez & Hicks, (2016), we argue that sensitivity to the new L1 input (which provides evidence of a new configuration of features responsible for a different grammatical representation of null and postverbal subjects) is key to understanding why the bilinguals in Miami underwent attrition but the UK group did not. This suggests that the selectivity of morphosyntactic attrition may depend on the amount of reassembly needed and the type of evidence available in the input to trigger such change.

More importantly, exposure to (qualitatively different) input alone may not be enough for reassembly to take place, a view which is consistent with Putnam and Sánchez’s (2013) claim that Intake (the input which is actually processed by speakers), and not just exposure to input alone, is what triggers changes in the L1 grammars of Spanish heritage speakers. In Hicks and Domínguez (2017), we make a similar claim arguing that only Intake can restructure native linguistic representations. That is, the processing of the meaningful components of input which lead to feature assembly during child language acquisition can continue beyond the critical period in the right contexts. Both heritage language acquisition and native language attrition represent such contexts. In our view, the processing of the input is likely to be qualitatively different when the structures are similar, although not completely the same, as in the case of the bi-dialectal speakers discussed here. In this case, the properties of the L1 grammar overlap with those of the L2 with respect to subject realisation, which facilitates greater processing for comprehension and production in this context, which, in turn, is crucial to Intake.

Even though these complex issues are far from being resolved, this keynote article directs our attention to the interplay between L1 processing difficulties and L1 structure reconfiguration in late bilingual speakers. S&K provide a promising starting point for future fruitful discussions among researchers from different disciplines and frameworks.

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Author’s address

Laura Domínguez

Modern Languages & Linguistics  
University of Southampton  
Southampton, SO17 1BJ  
United Kingdom  
  
ldo@soton.ac.uk