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THE STATE OF INCOMPLETENESS IN A BILINGUAL USER

The main concern of this paper is to investigate the relation between self evaluation of the L1 and L2 linguistic competences by bilingual university students and the concepts of fossilization and attrition. The two terms refer to changes in language proficiency and imply a state of incompleteness of linguistic knowledge of both languages. Fossilization is identified as stagnation in attaining the target language proficiency whereas attrition is described as a loss of aspects of previously acquired linguistic knowledge. The former occurs at the level of active L2 development whereas the latter takes place at the state of post-active language acquisition. The paper constitutes an attempt to investigate the significance of the two concepts in the processes of bilingual development and maintenance. It considers the manifestations of fossilization and attrition as well as their indications as to the linguistic competences of bilingual users. It eventually attempts to estimate how widespread the two phenomena may be in the bilingual context and what their product is.

Introduction

The primary concern of this paper is to discuss the state of linguistic deficiency as it is subjectively experienced by bilingual advanced students of the English language. The studies on the perception of subjects' own proficiency in the target and mother tongues as well as their perception of their progress within the interlanguage framework convey a picture of an incomplete, in terms of linguistic competence, bilingual user.

Numerous linguistic deficits are reported on in the studies on fossilization. Following from the data available (Wysocka 2009), it seems legitimate to say that the competence of an advanced language user is represented by mistakes and errors being the result of language transfer and mixture of languages interacting with one another. The language users, though rarely admit to lacks in their language competence,

emphasise the fact that their language changes, and is different in different areas and stages of development, often incomplete and far from the ideal L1 or L2 language system. Their opinions are reflected in the following statements:

- *My language comprises grammar rules and vocabulary coming from many languages which unfortunately are interacting with each other. It results in a mixture of those languages.*
- *It is changing, however, there are still some errors and mistakes.*
- *It is constantly developing and still vulnerable to transfer (I'm aware of this fact).*
- *It is at different stages of development.*
- *It is characterised by sometimes backsliding, but only in cases when I speak or write very quickly and try to simplify my utterance.*

The results of the study on attrition, conducted in 2007 among IJA students in Sosnowiec, showed that the more proficient the target language learner, the greater the perception of their linguistic deficiencies. What is more, self-confidence in one's linguistic proficiency dwindled with the level of advancement/year of studies. The majority of the students in their first year of studies did not report any substantial language erosion. More interestingly, none of the 16 subjects carried strong conviction about the possibility of L1 attrition. 31% expressed some degree of certainty (Fig. 1).

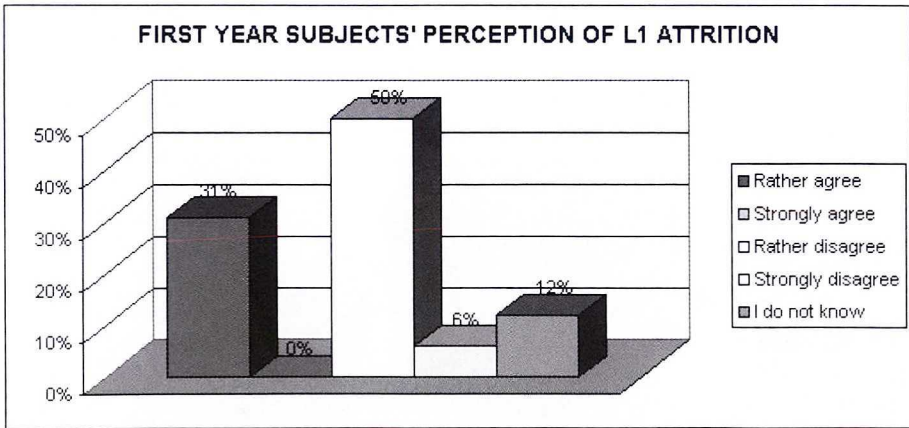


Fig. 1. 1st year subjects' perception of attrition

However, a substantial discrepancy between these subjects and the final year students, an overwhelming majority of whom admitted losing some elements of their L1 competence, could be observed. In case of the latter group the number of subjects who perceived some regression of their Polish language skills under the influence of English rose from 31% to 82%. At the same time, the number of the subjects who held feelings against the idea of foreign language encroaching on their mother tongue decreased

radically from 56% to 17%. It is noteworthy that among the most proficient foreign language learners, not a one response would decisively dismiss attrition coming into play. There were also fewer subjects in this group uncertain about the effects of the bilinguality on their L1 (Fig. 2).

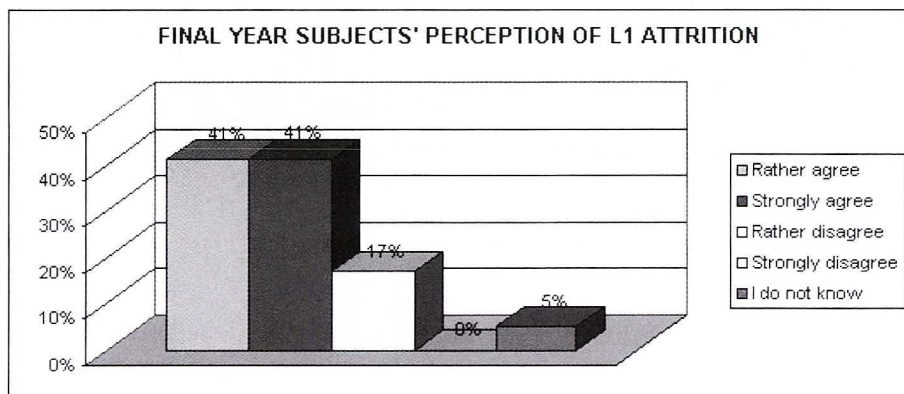


Fig. 2. Final year subjects' perception of L1 attrition

The major processes, which compose such a self-picture of an incomplete language user, are the previously mentioned fossilization and attrition. What links fossilization and attrition is a blockage observed as a result of the former giving rise to the latter. More precisely, the blockage in question, as Nakuma (2006: 21) has it, derives from a 'permanent state of not attaining a desired language competence' and, subsequently, starts to designate 'a permanent loss of some level of language competence that the language user acquired at an earlier stage'.

In other words, the former is responsible for the apparent linguistic stagnation and lack of development whereas the latter entails erosion and loss of some of the previously acquired level of proficiency. Both fossilization and attrition share a number of symptoms which, however, operate at different directions. These overlapping symptoms include:

- Redundancy
- Overgeneralizations
- Category extension/narrowing
- Use of formulaic expressions
- Approximations
- Loan translations
- Code switching
- Borrowings
- Loss of category distinctions
- Difficulties in lexical access and retrieval
- Agrammaticality and difficulties in grammaticality judgments, etc.

Fossilization

Language fossilization has been given a multiple interpretation, both with respect to the L1 (the so called native grammar) and the L2 (the non-native grammar). The most representative descriptions of the term in question treat it as:

- *the phenomenon of non-progression of learning despite continuous exposure to input, adequate motivation to learn, and sufficient opportunity for practice* Selinker (Selinker 1992: 257)
- *the inability of a person to attain native-like ability in the TL* (Lowther 1983: 127)
- *permanent intermediate systems and subsystems* (Nemser 1961)
- *non-target like structures* (Selinker & Lamendella 1978: 187), or
- *language incompleteness* (Schachter 1990: 99)

Attrition

Linguistic attrition has been reported in both primary and subsequent languages, in the mother-tongue, foreign and second language contexts. Attrition may regard both a group and an individual. The concept of language attrition has thus so far seen many definitions.

At the level of first language, language attrition has been viewed as:

- *erosion in the performance of a first or primary language* (Seliger 1996: 605, in Balcom 2003: 186).
- *loss of (or inability to produce) some L1 elements due to L2 influence: e.g. acceptance of syntactically deviant L1 sentences under the influence of L2 constraints...* (Pavlenko 2003: 34).
- *The loss of aspects of a previously fully acquired primary language resulting from the acquisition of another language* (Seliger 1996: 605, in Balcom 2003: 186).
- *The dismantling and reordering of the primary language in a contact situation with another language* (Latkowska 1998).
- *L1 attrition typically comes as a by-product of language contact* (De Bot & Hulsen in Cook 2002: 253).

At the level of foreign language production, attrition has been defined as:

- *a permanent loss of some level of L2 competence that the L2 user reportedly had acquired at an earlier stage* (Nakuma 2006: 21).
- *diminished linguistic skills as a result of overuse of certain elements of the language system* (Wysocka 1999: 425).

The subjects' comments on their L1 proficiency seem to reflect the above definitions of attrition:

- *I have difficulties with Polish orthography, inflections and I often doubt if my Polish sentences are correct*

- *I am unable to name things in Polish although I know their English equivalents*
- *I feel clumsy when speaking Polish*
- *I notice some changes in the accent and pronunciation of Polish words*
- *I forget Polish equivalents and adapt the English words in a Polish conversation*
- *I encounter problems with spelling Polish words due to limited reading in the Polish language*

Rationale behind fossilization and attrition

When it comes to the factors responsible for fossilization, it is the amount and quality of input that play the most significant role in the second language environment. Typically, the FL classroom input is very much limited and lacks in language variety. Most often, it comes from the teacher talk, student talk, and language materials to hand, and, more often than not, is the source of bad language habits. These, though less frequently, can also be formed as a result of psychological barriers couched in the user's willingness to maintain his/her own language identity or reluctance to take a language risk. Last but not least, the L2 fossilization is claimed to be caused by difficulties with parameter resetting (White 1993) and non-operation of UG learning principles restraining the language user from attaining second language values crucial to successful SLA. Both of them are influenced by a mature cognitive system, which imposes certain constraints on the process of second language learning, due to the resistance of the L1 cognitive system to the cognitive processes typical of L2 and L2 learning. In the case of L1 fossilization, however, it is the influence of other (like the second, the third or subsequent) languages, and the lack of exposure to the model native language that are to be blame. The consequences of the situation like that are usually reflected in backsliding and linguistic shortcomings, such as grammatically incorrect language forms and/or loan words or anglicisms.

Speaking in terms of L1 attrition in the second language environment, conditions conducive to it include increasingly restricted L1 input and output, which in turn distort its command (Cook 2003: 12).

Attrition of the target language in the FL environment is, according to Wysocka (1999), caused by exposure to input generated in artificial learning conditions. This input, especially with regard to English language teachers, is questionable not only in terms of its naturalness but also in terms of its correctness. As a matter of fact, English language teachers are exposed to the interlanguage adequate to the current stage of development of their learners. Additionally, they reinforce certain language habits through the cyclical process of language teaching and at the expense of a more diverse production.

A critical issue is the amount of effort invested in the language maintenance. An extensive period of non-use is believed to lead to erosion of the language system.

Scope of impact

The scope of fossilization is difficult to define and dependent on many variables. In her attempts to systematize and group the symptoms of fossilization, Han (2004: 117) has managed to find the language areas particularly susceptible to fossilization, irrespective of the language and its context. These involve “infrequent, irregular, semantically non-transparent, communicatively redundant, and perceptually non-salient forms”. It is due to their markedness that they are more likely subject to language misuse and language fossilization than the unmarked language forms. This is evident both at the lexical, morpho-syntactic and phonological level. As far as lexis is concerned, language calques in the form of non-existent vocabulary items are likely to occur (e.g. in English **existential* instead of *existential*, in Polish **inteligentność* instead of *inteligencja*). In the case of morpho-syntax, instances of wrong word formation (**unpolite* instead of *impolite* or **defilation* instead of *defilade* in English, and **kupowuje* instead of *kupuje* in Polish), and wrong word order (e.g. *Bardzo podoba się mi...*, instead of *Bardzo mi się podoba...* and the case of indirect questions taking on the form of direct ones in English, e.g. *Do you know how is it?*) are to prevail. And, finally, at the phonological level, the so called “foreign accents”, wrong pronunciation and intonation patterns are most frequently observed. To name a few examples, it is reported that the Polish users of English tend to have problems with a “th” sound, and rise-fall intonation patterns, whereas the instances of L1 (Polish) fossilization include stress shifts, i.e. from the last but one syllable to the first or the second one.

The exact onset of attrition and its scope of impact are also difficult to define unequivocally. The language areas that appear to be most vulnerable to attrition comprise the realm of vocabulary, grammar and phonology. Within the realm of lexis and semantics, linguistic erosion is identified by processes of borrowing, loan translation, semantic extension/narrowing and inaccessibility of linguistic items (Pavlenko 2003: 43). Changes in grammar comprise anomalies in case- gender-, number-marking, preposition choice and word order (Pavlenko 2003: 44). Changes in phonology include differences in Voiced Onset Times in the L1 of bilingual users for plosive consonants (such as *p, b, k, g*). These are, however, undetectable in a normal language production (Cook 2002: 65).

It was also suggested that general receptive proficiency may not be susceptible to attrition whereas some aspects of receptive grammar and vocabulary are (De Bot and Hulsen 2002). This implies that attrition may affect receptive and productive language skills to a different extent.

Conclusion

The state of incompleteness is multidirectional, and it is evoked by the dynamic character of a bilingual language development. The development itself seems to be influenced by the two driving forces, i.e. fossilization and attrition, where the former is perceived as a certain blockage or borderline giving rise to the latter. In the L1 con-

text, to be more specific, fossilization can be viewed as language incompleteness blocking the linguistic development and/or accelerating its deterioration leading to attrition. In the L2 environment, on the other hand, fossilization precedes attrition under the circumstances of non-progression of learning. On the one hand, established languages are reported to attrite under insufficient maintenance effort. On the other hand, the language systems may fossilize before reaching the other end of a bilingual continuum. These interrelationships, which prevent the bilingual user from reaching either end of the interlanguage continuum, may be illustrated in the form of a following diagram:

Interlanguage Continuum

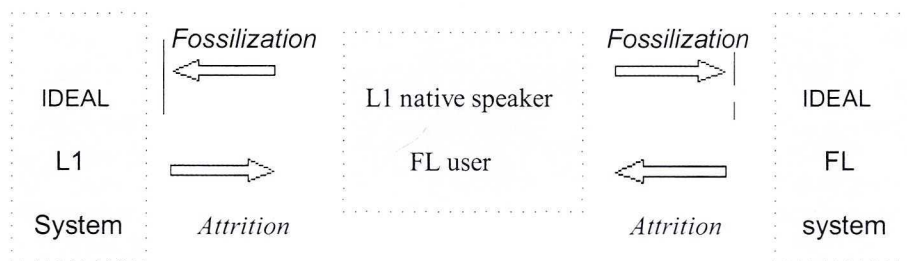


Fig. 3. Interlanguage continuum

In the light of the multicompetence model, suggested by Cook (1992), both positive and negative manifestations of bilingualism may be considered as an evidence for a different state of mind and different cognitive processing from monolinguals. A balanced bilingual copes with twice as much of competing linguistic information as a monolingual. However, assuming that linguistic proficiencies are dynamic, that is they may develop at one time, and fossilize and attrite at the other, it seems legitimate to say that the cognitive effort of a bilingual speaker should be multidirectional. It should be directed at not only maintaining but also enhancing the linguistic awareness and current states of development of L1 and FL. It may be claimed that it is inconceivable for the cognitive effort to be split evenly in all the directions. However, these conclusions might lead to formulation of practical implications for developing rather than not attaining or losing good language habits in either of the languages. Part of these needs for FL development has already been catered for by a range of student and teacher exchange programs, workshops and conferences. However, these activities are not available to all FL users, especially those outside large centres. The solution might be found in establishing local networks of speakers of the same languages who would share linguistic interests, problematic issues and consistently expand their FL competence. Similarly, in recognition of the final year subjects' needs for L1 re-establishment, Polish language classes could be specially designed to accompany FL studies. Hopefully, uncertainty towards one's language competences would be replaced with a measure of confidence.

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