

Monika S. Schmid and Barbara Köpke (Eds.): The Oxford Handbook of Language Attrition

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The Oxford Handbook of Language Attrition is an outstanding and timely volume. It is outstanding because it brings together both theoretical and empirical works that unquestionably mark the place of language attrition studies in the field of bilingualism. It is timely because the field is receiving an increasing attention and interest from scholars, and no such overarching piece of work has been published that integrates all domains of language attrition studies (first language attrition, second language attrition, heritage languages, language attrition and age, attrition at different language levels (lexical, grammatical, phonological).

Language attrition research does not have a long history. The term was first coined by Haugen (1938), who used it to refer to the process of forgetting one's native language. The next milestone was Andersen's study (1982) on the determination of linguistic attributes of language attrition. After a period of being a neglected area, systematic research on language attrition started at the beginning of the 2000's. As Schmid (2019) notes "empirical findings initially were quite slow to emerge, as much of the early work done on language attrition fell into one of three categories: a) theoretical/hypothetical work; b) qualitative work or small-scale pilot studies; c) initial outlines of larger projects." (p. 182). Approaches to language attrition have also gone through modifications, which is well exemplified by the following definitions:

"the non-pathological decrease in proficiency in a language that had previously been acquired by an individual." (Köpke and Schmid, 2004: 3).

"We refer to any of the phenomena that arise in the native language of a sequential bilingual as the consequence of the co-activation of languages, crosslinguistic transfer or disuse, at any stage of second language (L2) development and use, as language attrition. First language (L1) attrition is therefore considered to be the process by which a) pre-existing linguistic knowledge becomes less accessible or is modified to some extent as a result of the acquisition of a new language, and b) L1 production, processing or comprehension are affected by the presence of this other language."(Köpke & Schmid, 2017: 637-638).

The handbook is well-structured, and each domain of language attrition studies is included in the different parts of the book. The *content* of the book is already informative because the reader can familiarize him/herself with the main areas of language attrition by looking at the titles of the six parts, with the main topics (40

altogether) discussed within each domain and with the names of the contributors. However, it is worth noting and it adds to the value of the volume that not all of the contributors are devoted solely to the field of language attrition. Along this line, the authors can be divided into two groups: those who come from another field of bilingualism research but approach their topic from a language attrition perspective and those who have been working on subject area of attrition. An example of the first group is Judith F. Kroll, who works in the field of cognitive neuroscience and studies how bilinguals cope with two languages in mind. Nevertheless, she brings a huge benefit to the topic of attrition by reviewing the psycholinguistic laboratory evidence on the accessibility of L1 due to increased L2 proficiency and the implications of retrieval induced forgetting (RIF) theories. The other group is represented by authors like Monika S. Schmid, one of the editors of the volume, whose theoretical and empirical work on language attrition has been published in several journals and books. Schmid (2013:3) portrays attrition as “*the situation of linguistic drift sketched above where a migrant achieves a high level of proficiency in the language of his or her new environment, uses this language on a daily basis, and consequently experiences an increase in variability in the way some lexical, grammatical or phonetic properties of the language are applied*”.

The *Introduction* written by the editors summarizes the history of language attrition and gives a brief overview of the main contents of the book. As the editors note: “*The present Handbook is a testimony to the fact that attrition is now very much part of the mainstream of applied linguistics*” (Schmid & Köpke, 2019: 3). The book is composed by six parts and the content of each part is introduced by a chapter written by a well-known representative of the field.

Part I, *Theoretical implications of language attrition*, describes models and hypotheses related to language attrition, such as the *Competition Model*, *Complex Dynamic Model*, *the Feature Reassembly Hypothesis*, *The Interface Hypothesis*, and *the Bottleneck hypothesis*. MacWhinney uses the *Competition Model*, which is based on the idea that language emerges from the process of competition, to clarify language attrition; an interesting aspect of this model is the possibility to analyze the interplay between the risk factor and the protective factor. Opitz proposes the CDST model as a perspective on personal background variables in L1 attrition. Language is considered to be a dynamic system with unpredictable but not entirely random development, while CDST is concerned with an effort to forecast a past condition based on the present.

Part II, *Psycholinguistic and neurolinguistic approaches to language attrition*, explores both neuro- and psycholinguistic evidences of language attrition, which are presented in the individual chapters to account for language attrition and in reverse: attrition data is used to inform existing theories of language representation and

processing. Sharwood-Smith (Chapter 8) discusses language acquisition and language attrition as outcomes of language development, furthermore, attrition is considered to be the manifestation of the competition between language systems. The idea that attrition is the outcome of two dynamic interacting systems is confirmed by the following chapters where lexical attrition and morpho-syntactic attrition are discussed (Chapters 9-10). The next three chapters link language attrition to pathological language dysfunctions, such as Developmental Language Disorders. The last two chapters of Part II present the state of the art neurolinguistic approaches to language attrition.

Part III, *Linguistic factors in language attrition*, targets to explain the crucial and significant factors which are taken as attributes of attrition: age, environment, frequency and recency of language use. Chapter 16 focuses on lexical attrition, vocabulary being the most vulnerable to attrition. Evidences to dormant language hypothesis are provided, which relies on the memory of attritors, stating that they never lose their language and still can recall it after a long time of non-exposure (Isurin & Seidel, 2015). Several chapters discuss phonetic and phonological attrition. Changes in phonetic performance occurs due to decreased exposure, and leads to L1 modification, e.g. acquiring a foreign accent. Lexical attrition is discussed by Jarvis in Chapter 21. He points out that lexical attrition does not only refer to the inability to produce and comprehend L1 words, but also to the fluency, accuracy and complexity of their L1 lexical skills.

The next part (Part IV) identifies and details all the variables that have been found to influence language attrition: *Extralinguistic factors in language attrition*. One of the most crucial findings of attrition studies is that puberty is a decisive period in the extent of attrition. For example, children's language proficiency may decrease drastically even after one year of non-exposure to their L1, while the older speakers tend to maintain their first language for a more extended period. The frequency of language use is another crucial factor discussed, with the conclusion that the "*use of L1 with other bilinguals in casual, informal interactions may facilitate some forms of L1 attrition*" (Schmid, 2011c): establishing a foreign accent as an example. Bylund examined *The maturational account*, and concluded that during pre-puberty time the plasticity of the brain is more increased and prepared to acquire a new language.

Part V contains chapters about *Second Language Attrition*. The part provides a historical background, terminological clarifications and definitions. It starts with an introduction to the ideas of L2 attrition, as well as the evidence of the impossibility of entire lexical loss, with the studies testing the Saving Paradigm. Extra-linguistic factors play an essential role in language attrition, though there is a complication of precise measurement, which is difficult, due to failure to identify the factors clearly

and find their right qualifiers. For example, attitude is considered to be an unstable concept to measure.

Finally, part VI, *Heritage Languages* discusses the question of what it means for a speaker to be a native speaker, being exposed to a language only during early childhood or at once with the majority language. The authors note the idea of language competence during the lifetime and how it changes due to ideologies and language choices. The length of language exposure plays an important role in linguistic growth of a heritage speaker. Examples of bilingual returnees to their homeland and their language processing are presented in the chapters of this part.

A very useful and innovative part of the book is the *Concluding remarks* by Kees de Bot, who, as one of the well-known authors in the field, reflects on the content of the book as well as on problematic areas in the field.

The Handbook of Language Attrition is an excellent compilation of state of the art studies in one book. The Handbook can be very useful for those who are interested in the phenomena of *language attrition* as it gives insights in the field from a variety of perspectives. The reader is guided by the structure of the book through the topics of attrition in a natural manner. All in all, this book is highly recommended to everyone interested, starting from BA students, ending up with researchers in the field of applied linguistics, and for those who are language attritors themselves.

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