

Language Loss

David J. Lehner

INTRODUCTION

A great number of language researchers and teachers of other languages believe that one will lose language ability if it is not used for an extended period of time. Most research concerned with this idea has dealt with L1 loss although it can also occur in other tongues (second, foreign or subsequently, learned or acquired ones). The period of 'non-use' and resultant language loss varies from person to person and the 'type' of people investigated. In addition, the 'degree of ability' in language(s) seems also to be a very crucial issue. In short, the 'bilingual' or 'multilingual' must have reached a certain 'high' level of language proficiency (use & understanding). The research to this point in time is mainly concerned with the 'mother tongue' and, consequently, this paper will chiefly deal with this type of 'language loss'.

It goes without saying that polyglot or bilingual individuals offer the best and most compelling, (if not different) evidence on the topic of language loss. These persons 'first hand' experience(s), in both learning and losing a language form the basis of this paper. Herein we will mainly confine ourselves to research and data dealing with first language loss, although this is not intended to mean that other types of linguistic loss do not occur or are unimportant. Far from it! Other areas of language loss are also important and should be investigated. The idea-that L1 loss can and does occur (if the mother tongue is not used at all, or at best, only sparingly) will also be looked at here. This hypothesis, simply stated, contends that there exists a correlation between language acquisition (ways of learning another tongue and the reasons for its loss) and attrition. (The interested reader should peruse articles written on the 'recapulation' theory).

It must be said, at the outset, that both linguistic and non-linguistic factors are very important in language acquisition, use and loss. More research is needed in all of the possible areas in order to 'explain' language attrition in every area. It seems axiomatic to the mind of this writer that language change and its acquisition can be referred to as some sort of 'loss' in the linguistic realm.

Chomsky's tremendous theory of(UG) Universal Grammar parameters and how 'marked' or

'unmarked' a linguistic item is and what bearing this may have on its learning, use and, possible, loss, are very important here and it is suggested that the reader study the works of N.Chomsky. This linguist's L1 work is of great importance in these contexts and an understanding of what he ascertains is absolutely essential in the understanding the important ideas contained in language loss.

Language attrition may result in the complete loss of the L1. This paper, as previously mentioned, investigates the ideas that first language partial loss (in most cases) and total L1 attrition can, and sometimes do actually occur.

Most of what follows is the work of others. Indeed, many things discussed by the author of this paper have been dealt with.

I

Quite a bit of research concerning language loss has been carried out in the preceding decades. It seems to show that only in terms of 'real' brain insult can study be 'realistically' done. Consequently, loss in language ability (both production & comprehension) has been studied from the point of view of brain problems that seem to be a direct result of some kind of sickness or injury.

There has been documented a loss of language-especially in terms of use ability-in person's who have suffered some sort of brain damage. However, this type of linguistic disability is not solely determined on this basis. Brain damage perhaps demonstrates this loss most readily and language literature is rife with details concerning the extent and, subsequently, the type of injury that has occurred in people who have some sort of brain impairment in terms of both language processing and its practical use.

Studies have shown (rather convincingly) that the returning language (L1, L2 or another tongue) tends to be that which was in use at the time that the brain insult took place. Opler and Maech (1991) carried out a study of first language loss in polyglot and bilingual people which looked at such things as the languages acquired; the ages of the people studied; gender; handedness (left or right) which has a tendency to be related to hemispheric influence; varying types of brain damage and a host of other factors. This study resulted in these two language researchers, at least tentatively, to hypothesize that two (2) things appeared to be of crucial importance in whether the L1 is recovered or not (and to what degree): the extent of the brain insult (i.e.injury) that took place; and the 'handedness' (right or left) of the person studied.

Despite beliefs that the type of bilingualism (compound, coordinate or coordinate-compound) is influential in the brain's organization of both L1 & L2, and how this could (does?) influence

both organization and use of languages, this study suggests that it is really inconsequential in how the organization of tongues in the brain takes place. There is really no clear way to 'know' whether the first language is recoverable or not after brain insult. However, ... 'the manner of acquisition of the L2 was seen not to influence access after brain damage.' Obler & Maech (1991:62). Education level seemed to be very strongly related to L1 recovery-however, these researchers stressed that literacy itself does not seem to be related to the language factor in any clear way. They did feel, however, that education extent had a great deal to do with language recovery (the higher the level-the better).

The researchers found in this study that the inability to use (or know) language especially the L1-be it either temporary or permanent loss-was mainly due to some kind of brain injury. They further found that an accurate prediction (for recovery) could be made if the lesions (in the brain) were in the right hemisphere and the party involved was left-handed (Ibid:63). At least Junior High School level education was a prerequisite for 'possible' recovery-even with serious brain damage. They also found that the age of those studied did not seem to be a factor in terms of language recovery. In short, persons of a wide variety of ages were found to receive their linguistic abilities again-even following serious brain insults.

Obler & Maech further found in this study that that aphasia (in the L1) was more related to so-called 'brain' factors than the 'type' (coordinate, compound or compound-coordinate) of bilingualism encountered. They felt from this study results that persons with 'atypical' (unusual?) organization of the brain were more likely to lose their L1 than those with more usual(!) brain configurations.

These results and consequent conclusions from this study not-with-standing, the authors' were not able to address actual first language loss. In fact, they seem to feel that subjects in this study may have 'understood' the L1 test questions but were unable to respond in any linguistic code-be it their L1 or any other language at their disposal. Another factor that cannot satisfactorily be dealt with in this study is concerned with to 'what extent' the first language was in use before the brain injury incident took place. This cannot be accurately ascertained.

II

In this part of the present paper the idea, which states that some areas of language learning/acquisition and use go from simple to complex (in theory), will be scrutinized. This hypothesis is based, primarily, on the idea that language and their acquisition (and, ultimately, their use) should be compared with with living matter. (The interested reader is invited to see

Paul, 1888; Stam, 1976; Clark & Clark, 1977; Opler, L., 1982; among others, for material written about this language hypothesis).

Things concerning such a 'look' at things and, consequently, make such an idea more 'digestible' are mainly concerned with the idea that (very simply stated) language learning and its change are very gradual, never-ending processes and work on the idea that language acquisition/learning and use start simple and gradually (yet certainly) become more complex in nature. It seems, to this writer, that this way of considering things can (in theory) apply to everything this world has to offer. Everything in life seems to go to a more 'complicated' state-why should language be any different? This the hypothesis maintains, is especially true with respect to L1 acquisition/learning and its use. In fact, a careful investigation of the multifarious aspects of language would seem to imply that such a view cannot help but be 'right'! However, it must be stated at the outset that there is even a difference in the views held by some major language researchers (and teachers of language) with respect to what this hypothesis holds: some believing that it is the continuous nature of language learning and its use that stands in the forefront and others maintaining that it is the non-continuous aspects of language that are most important. It must be said immediately that the 'true' nature of language acquisition/learning and its practical use remain elusive. These things are simply 'not known' at present. There are a vast number of factors involved herein! That's what make the teaching of languages so very challenging and interesting. As concerns language changes over time, things are definitely 'not clear'. Various language scholars and teachers have offered differing (and interesting!) views about how these changes should (indeed, must!) be viewed and dealt with. Regretfully, to this point in time, language learning, use and teaching remain enigmas. Some researchers have even maintained that, given the ever-increasing complexity of the environment in which human beings find themselves these days, certain aspects related to the human organism's linguistic abilities can, and, in fact, DO change.

How acceptable this hypothesis is happens to be concerned with the level at which language is used by human organisms when discussed. This idea seems unquestionable when dealing with human language acquisition/learning and its loss in bilinguals and polyglots. This is very much related to Ribot's law and language use in general. In essence, things related to language seem to focus on the idea that language understanding occurs prior to language use (comprehension prior to application). Language skills, including words known and, therefore, used, applied in 'right' situations, phonological sequences and etc., can be unavailable to the human for use and perhaps, understanding. Language skills can be lost-most notably after some kind of brain injury. For the understanding and use of language(s) this has been accepted as 'truth'. However,

language skill loss is another story.

Research has shown that language loss is related to some sort of damage to the human brain. This tends not to be of a gradual nature, but, rather, instantaneous. Also, research seems to bear out that certain parts (of language ability) NOT OVERALL LANGUAGE ABILITY are most likely to be affected in a negative manner. (The interested reader is encouraged to read the ideas and research of Jacobsen (1941) in this connection).

There also seems to be language loss in dementia (aging) as opposed to disease and/or injuries, Dementia appears not to have anything to do with language ability decline in the form of any type of damage-it would seem to more 'natural'. In short, all humans will suffer some sort of dementia. How this will manifest itself is anybody's guess-although certain generalities about its nature can be drawn. (If interest in this idea should exist in the mind of any reader of this paper, (s)he is encouraged to read about this highly interesting topic). Polyglots have been shown to go from other language use to that of the first language when 'regressing' in terms of language use. Research would seem to bear out that the more 'proficient' one's ability to use another language may be, the more likely that person is to lose the ability to use that tongue (both in terms of understanding and production) at all levels. (See DeBot & Clyne, 1989, for more discussion about this).

Something in multilingual situations that is observed quite often is when people begin to shift to the use of an 'unnatural' form of their first language. This most often occurs in later generations of other language use when other forms of first language become the 'preferred' tongue of communication. This L1 language has been shown to be 'different' from more conventional (acceptable?) forms of the mother tongue. It seems that the L1 can be imparted to subsequent generations in a different form from the 'original' first language. In short, the L1 has a tendency to change in L2 environments where the latter appears to be the dominant form of communication. This new form of the L1 is used by later generations and its use seems to be dependent on the opportunities for using the 'new' L1 often in an L2 environment. (See Greelen & DeBot, 1986).

Research can also be found which shows the second language being lost (or abandoned) by people who have returned to their native (L1) lands, and for whatever reason have stopped using the 'now' foreign tongue. This most often happens when the second language is taught to a certain level (not the 'highest') and is not learned or used beyond this level. After acquiring/learning is completed the learners may lose it again. (Interested readers are invited to see Weltens, 1987). There have also been studies carried out to look at other ways in which the L1 can be 'lost' in an L2 environment. (See Anderson, 1982).

It has also been shown that certain words can be learned (acquired) and stored in a 'preferred' manner. (Interested readers are invited to look at Berko-Gleason, 1982, for more discussion on this highly interesting topic). Such words and/or grammatical constructions tend to be resistant to loss and, consequentially, can be more 'completely' learned (acquired), used and retained.

Not much current research data that actually investigates the regression hypothesis can be found. This hypothesis seems not to be THAT important; however, this is not meant to imply that the idea is absolutely irrelevant and, therefore, should be rejected. Indeed, this hypothesis has consciously or unconsciously influenced the development of language teaching and learning materials. In the opinion of Kees de Bot & Weltins (1991) the 'why's' for other kinds of language loss have not been looked at in sufficient detail to this point in time. It is their contention that either rejection or acceptance of this hypothesis/idea is linked to certain things: This hypothesis claims that language loss is of a 'gradual' nature (barring injury to the brain) and that language learning is more of a 'decided' nature. The gradualness (as these authors maintain) must be spelled out in more exact terms. In this writer's opinion, this is what language acquisition/learning and effective teaching should be concerned with.

Acquisition orders with respect to all forms of language have not been adequately ascertained and this is very related to the language regression hypothesis. Also, in studying this idea, it is not really clear whether certain structures have really been 'lost' or simply never learned and used in order to come to a more accurate idea of what structures have REALLY been 'lost' and which were never possessed by the human organism in the first place and therefore, could never have REALLY been 'lost'.

Other things have to be looked at that are not linguistic per-se in the loss of language. Sociolinguistic factors demand to be investigated in order to determine where and in what way they belong to the world of language acquisition/learning, use and loss. Sociolinguistic factors are very related to language learning at all levels and how languages are learned (acquired), used and lost, must be studied. The role of interference and other things related to language also demand investigation. Such things are important and therefore, cannot be overlooked.

III

Language choice and subsequent use by the so-called 'balanced' bilingual or polyglot (if either really does exist) seems to be determined to a large extent by choices made by these types of people. These choices, in turn, are shaped by multifarious linguistic and sociolinguistic factors. Simply stated, not all languages known and, therefore, used by an individual are equal in terms

of 'strength'. Research seems to confirm that there seems to be a 'preferred' language depending on a wide variety of factors-both linguistic and non-linguistic (e.g. the participants in the conversation and their choices of which language to use; the topic being discussed-which has been shown to determine code and other choices; sociolinguistic items and etc.). In short, language choice by bilingual or multilingual persons is not easily determined-there are many factors involved.

The start of first language loss seems directly related to the level of languages attained, and therefore, used by individuals. Also involved in this 'choice' of linguistic codes are complex societal factors. For instance, the language mainly spoken (used) in the country of residence is very important, and is involved in linguistic code choice by individuals.

Barring cases of severe brain trauma that, somehow, affect the language choice other things must also be considered. In brief, there are many factors (both linguistic and non-linguistic) that must be taken into account when looking at linguistic choice by individuals. Many factors have a prime bearing on language acquisition/learning, use and loss. Any and all linguistic change (as already mentioned) may take a variety of forms-all of which can be (and, indeed, are) important. Examples of linguistic change determined by a wide variety of things abound in the literature-especially in the case of bilingual or multilingual individuals-this is of vital importance. All factors must be considered in order to obtain a firm handle on multilingualism-specifically, rule meaning and its formation in each linguistic code that the individual may possess. As mentioned previously, both internal (relating to the learner himself/herself) and external factors (relating to the social context in terms of language learning and use) must be investigated.

Marked and unmarked forms of the languages used must be made known whenever possible. For example, is a marked form in one linguistic code taking on unmarkedness in another language? What bearing (if any) does this have on the learning and use of the linguistic codes? These questions are very important and demand to be dealt with. Questions about 'core' and 'periphery' and UG also cannot be ignored.

CONCLUSION

Many societies today are dominated by a kind of 'linguistic purity'. In short, the possession of more than one language is somehow determined as 'unnatural' by the monolingual majority. The use of (and knowledge of) another linguistic code is somehow thought of as unnatural. It is this author's opinion that this is both unfounded and untrue. Possessing more than one linguistic code is something that should be never evaluated as 'bad'. It can only be something 'good'! It in no way makes an individual more or less than a citizen of this planet.

This paper has attempted to show that language loss does occur and the implications this has for other languages learned/acquired cannot be ignored. This reality is most readily apparent in cases of severe brain trauma brought on by injury or disease. However, what awaits each person, whether monolingual or multilingual, dementia, cannot be dismissed or ignored. The language in use at the time of the brain insult (aphasia) must be ascertained whenever possible. To this point in time, this does not seem to have been carried out.

That language can be lost is very important (and clear) in cases of severe brain trauma. This seems to hold true in cases of the L1, L2 or other subsequently acquired/learned tongues.

It also seems to be true that language can be lost in ways not concerned with some sort of physical insult to the brain. What implications (if any) this may have for other languages (acquisition/learning, use, teaching and loss) must be known.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Andersen, R. 1982 "Determining the linguistic attributes of language attrition," in Lambert and Freed (eds.), 83-118.
- Anderson, J. 1973 "Structural aspects of linguistic change", London: Longman.
- Beasley, D., and G. Davis 1981. "Aging, communication processes and disorders", New York: Grune & Stratten.
- Berko-Gleason, J. 1982 "Insights from child language acquisition for second language loss" in Lambert and Freed (eds.), 13-23.
- Caramazza, A., and E. Zuff 1978 (eds.) "Language acquisition and language breakdown, parallels and divergencies. Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press.
- Chomsky, N. 1981 "Lectures on government and binding". Dordrecht: Foris.
- Cook, V. 1984. "Chomsky's universal grammar and second language learning" *Applied Linguistics* 6: 1-18.
- Clyne, M. 1981 "Second language attrition and first language reversion among elderly bilinguals in Australia," in W. Meid and K. Heller (eds.) 25-32.
- DeBot, K. and M. Clyne. 1989. "Language reversion revisited," *Studies in Second Language Acquisition* 11: 167-177.
- Debot, K. and T. Lintsen. 1986. "Foreign language proficiency in the elderly," in Weltens et al. (eds.), 131-141.
- Fishman, J. 1972. *The Sociology of language*. Rowley, MA: Newbury House Pub.
- Geshwind, N. 1983. "Genetics: fate, chance and environmental control," in C. Ludlow and J. Cooper (eds.), "Genetic aspects of speech and language disorder. New York: Academia Press, 21-36.
- Geshwind, N. and A. Galaburda 1985. "Cerebral lateralization: biological mechanisms, associations and pathology: a hypothesis and a program for research", *Archives of Neurology* 42: 428-654.
- Gordon, H. W. 1980. "Cerebral organization in bilinguals: I. Lateralization," *Brain and Language* 9: 255-268.
- McLaughlin, B. 1984. "Individual differences in language learning strategies," in B. McLaughlin,

- "Second language acquisition in childhood, Vol. I. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum Associates, 136-176.
- Obler, L. 1983. "Language and brain dysfunction in dementia" in S. Segalowitz (ed), "Language functions and brain organization. New York: Academic Press, 267-281.
- Obler, M. and M. Albert. 1982. "Language in aging", in M. Albert (ed), "Clinical neurology in aging". New York: Oxford University Press, 245-253.
- Paradis, M. 1977. "Bilingualism and aphasia," in H. Whitaker and H. Whitaker (eds) "Studies in neuro-linguistics", vol. 3. New York: Academia Press.
- Paradis, M. 1983 (ed). Readings on aphasia in bilinguals and polyglots. Canada: Dider.
- Paradis, M. 1987 "The assessment of bilingual aphasic". Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Seliger, H. & R. Vargo "First language attrition". 1991. Cambridge University.
- Stam, J. 1976. "Inquiries into the origin of language. The fate of a question." New York: Harper & Row.
- Weltens, B. 1987. "The attrition of foreign language skills: a literature review" *Applied Linguistics* 8: 22-38.
- Weltens, b., K. DeBot, & T. Van Eds.. 1986 (eds.) "Language attrition in progress" Dordrecht/ Providence: Foris.

