

First Language Attrition on Adult Immigration Groups: A Case Study of a Chinese Middle-aged Immigrant in Melbourne

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Abstract

L1 attrition is a common phenomenon appears in immigration groups. This study investigated the linguistic and non-linguistic effects on adult immigrants' L1 attrition in bilingual context. Participant in this study is a middle-aged Chinese female who has settled in Melbourne for 30 years. Study findings indicate that adults' L1 lexicon is most vulnerable section although the overall L1 attrition is not significant. High correlation among language attitude, frequent contact with L1 and L1 attrition reveal that non-linguistic factors play crucial parts in adult L1 attrition. And the results provided implications on bilingual and bi-cultural education from immigrants' view. The determination of psycholinguistics is worth further discussions in future.

Keywords

First language attrition; Middle-aged immigrant.

1. Introduction

Language attrition, referring to the reduce of an individuals' speaking ability and language understanding, is a newly emerging subfield in applied linguistics which has been systematically studied for recent three decades (Ecke, 2004). An overwhelming tendency in this field locates in the traffic from the first language (L1) to the second (L2), while ignores the impact from the contrary direction. L1 attrition is one kinds language forgetting that always occurs within bilingual context as a result of immigration. Previous researches focus on immigration groups investigation their L1 attritions among different age groups. The interlanguage affective factors and the extra-linguistic factors are main scopes linguists concerned (Ng & Wigglesworth 2007, Köpke & Schmid 2004).

2. Lit Review

Given recent theoretical developments in bilingualism, the traffic between the first and the second language systems is bi-directional. It means L1 and L2 affect and shape each other mutually, and, bilinguals have built an 'in-between' way of language processing and reacting. As Cook (2003) set out, 'it is probably the case that with the acquisition of an L2 at any point in an individual's lifetime, the L1 system is also fundamentally and irrevocably changed.' This integrated view, against the traditional 'L1 transfer' bias, suggests that there is no so-called 'normal' language (which usually indicates L1), and a 'deviated' one (the L2). Instead, the statues of two languages are alternately changed with individual's development. In the other words, if one emigrated to a foreign country where his L1 is replaced by other language, L1 attrition is likely to happen if people immerse intensively in L2 input and rarely have chance to use their L1. Pervious research suggest that L1 attrition is a common phenomenon observed in immigrant groups whatever their age (Ng & Wigglesworth 2007). Based on substantial case studies and massive data analysis, a set of L1 attrition triggering conditions are formulated: emigration, extensive use of the L2 in daily life, extremely reduced use of L1 in daily life, and a fairly long time span (decades) (Schmid & Köpke 2007).

Studies on L1 attrition is inevitably related with L2 acquisition, particularly for pre-puberty groups. The significant role played by Critical Periods on young bilinguals' language acquisition and attrition is widely discussed and researched (Pallier 2007). However, for the aged group, researchers had paid more attention to the psychological deterioration on memory and focused on how lose accessibility to knowledge storage could affect bilingual's language performances (De Bot 2007). Given various factors effecting on L1 attrition, whatever linguistically or extra-linguistically, Köpke (2004) suggests that age on departure (i.e., age at onset of L1 attrition) could be the most important predictor for L1 attrition. This suggestion values the importance of social factors (language community, language policy and etc.) as well as cognitive variables (language attitude, motivation and emotion). In a word, psychological variables interact with social and cognitive factors contributing to the individuals' L1 attrition in bilingual context (Schmid & Köpke 2004, 2007).

Previous studies concerned L1 attrition among young and elder immigration groups (Schmid & Köpke 2004, 2007; Ng & Wigglesworth 2007), while a limited number of studies focus on the group in-between. Young adults and middle-aged people take the largest proposition in the whole population of immigrations whose L1 are featured by L2 interferences and social surroundings as well.

Australia as one of the biggest immigrations country in the world receives over million immigrants each year. Among them, Chinese immigrants, as the one of the largest non-English speaking immigration groups, occupy 10% of the total immigration, taking the second place. Overseas Chinese Affairs Office of the State Council reports (2015) that in the past decade, China has become the largest immigrants input country for Australia, and this trend keeps going high. Each year nearly 30 thousands of Chinese teenagers and young adults surge into Australia for higher education resources and better working chances, and many of them has settled in this country permanently, constituting the main force of Chinese immigrants. In the other words, people from their 20s to 50s have become the major group of Chinese immigrants in Australia since this century. And the L1 attrition appeared in such large groups is worth exploring.

Differing from the younger and the elder groups, the 'in-between' group chooses to emigrate in their prime of life who are less affected by age factors. Solid knowledge and independent value system make 'in-between' group an objective reflection of adult L1 attrition in bilingual context.

3. My Study

To amplify the current research scope of L1 attrition on different age groups and complete the dynamic path of individuals' L1 development in immigration groups, this study puts the focus on middle-aged Chinese immigrants in Australia. This study attempts to mark attrition features of L1 from four major aspects (listening, speaking, reading, and writing), and to explore underlying causes in terms of extra-linguistic factors. The implications for this case study are to draw a baseline through probing the extent of L1 attrition on one typical sample of Chinese immigrants in Australia, and to grope the relation between attrition and outside environment as well as inside cognition.

Given on this purpose of research, the representativeness and the generality of the participant in this case are crucial. On account of the L1 attrition triggering condition from Cook (2003), qualified participants need to meet all four conditions. In the other words, middle-aged people who moved from China to Australia in their early 20s and settled for decades are ideal candidates. Besides, ideal subject should be consistent with common features portrayed by *Annual Report on Chinese International Migration* (2014, 2015) that come from comparatively high socioeconomic status with certain professional skills. Based on these characteristics, this

case selected a 55-years-old Chinese female as the representative of the current immigration group in Australia.

For investigating how L1 decays in L2 context, especially how this attrition affects user's language attitudes and identities, this study uses semi-structure interview approach to explore the insider's view. Interview is one way to elicit the speaker's identity and reaction to him/herself and the external social environment, by and through self-narration. Because of life-story leaning on the basis of speaker's memories, and memories are always selected and modified by individuals' attitudes and values, it is reasonable to collect narrators' feelings from stories they told (McAdams 2003). Despite the imaginative element of personal narrative and the subjectivity of data interpretation, interview is still a reliable approach to provide qualitative research through offering an emit perspective.

4. Method

4.1. Participant Profile

The participant in this case named Ruo, is a middle-aged female from China who has lived in Melbourne nearly 30 years. Ruo grew up in mainland China and gained her bachelor degree there. She left China in her young age in 1987 when she was 25 years old. According to the background questionnaire investigation, the participant came to Melbourne with her Chinese husband. And now they live in Melbourne with their two adult daughters. Ruo used to be a pharmacist in Melbourne but now is a housewife, and all her families work as medical professionals in local hospitals. They use English as their working language but live in one Chinese community in Melbourne. Ruo speaks Chinese with her husband and friends, but English with her daughters, because the two girls hardly understand Chinese. In daily communication, Ruo shifts her languages depending on interlocutors and contexts.

4.2. Material

This study divides into two parts: the first is questionnaire investigation; the second is semi-structured interview. The questionnaire covers personal information, educational background and immigration history (see in the appendix 1) which was sent to four potential candidates. One of them who fits the most involving to the following interview. Designed on the participant's responses of questionnaire, interview questions are prepared (see in the appendix 2).

4.3. Procedure

Primary selection was carried out before interview among four candidates who were picked out according to Cook's (2003) L1 attrition triggering conditions. After the questionnaire investigation, one female was chosen. A semi-structure interview was planned on the basis of background information. The interview was given at the participant's home by Chinese. The 54 mins long interview was conducted without the third person present, and it was recorded by a iPhone 6 application – the Vocal Memo with the interviewee's permission. The audio material was processed by Media Cope 4.0 to cut into clips, and related parts were transcribed and translated.

5. Result and Discussion

In self-repot part, Ruo did a Likert-scale (1-7) questionnaire on her L1 competence. Among listening, speaking, reading and writing, the four major language competences, she gave full mark (i.e. 7–highly proficiency) for her overall competence and reading & listening skills, while relatively low marks(5-fluent) to writing and speaking.

L1 Attrition on Speaking and Writing & L2 Interference

For the speaking ability, Ruo mentioned that she always forgot names for certain objects in chatting and used English words to replace them. Code-mixing is a frequent phenomenon in her life, and most of the time, it happens unconsciously. Evidences could be found in the whole process of interview. For example, before our interview began, Ruo used a code-mixing language to host me:

来来来，吃点水果，喝杯茶，家里刚买的，有grapes和yellow kiwi。

(Come here! Take some fruits and have a cup of tea. There are grapes and yellow kiwis.)

In this sentence, name of fruits is replaced by L2 vocabularies unconsciously. Similar phenomenon repeatedly occurred in the whole interview which indicates that Ruo has an easier accessibility to L2 than to L1 on certain categories of words. Besides, Ruo noted that her ability to quote Chinese classics and verses has decayed. It is hard for her to recall even the most common Chinese idioms, sayings and ancient poems immediately in conversations. Ruo said:

'I know exactly what the allusion about but I just cannot remember how to speak it out.'

In light of writing, Ruo mentioned she barely has chance to write Chinese with pen now.

'I usually forget or mix up the correct form of characters in writing, even in typing. Misusing of characters makes me feel that my writing competence declined.'

She also noted that e-mail and short message are two main genres she written now. And most of them are sent to families or friends, so there are mainly made up with short sentences and phrases.

'It would be truly hard if you ask me writing an article immediately. I think I have never written anything formal in Chinese since I moved to here (here). I have no idea about how to write an opening sentence now.'

The strongest point coming from Ruo's narration is that, in Ruo's view, her L1 productivity (i.e. oral and written abilities) has deteriorated during the 30 years' immigration. Under the influence of L2, frequently used Chinese words like '葡萄 (grapes)' are replaced by L2 lexical items. Counting through the whole recording, all the code-mixing appears in noun position, and most of them are pronouns. Some words like 'box hill (a place name)' and 'tram' that have no counterparts in Chinese are directly borrowed from L2 instead of using their translated forms. These features are consistent with notions from previous L1 attrition studies in adult bilingualism. Pavlenko (2000) pointed that evidence of attrition would encompass L2-influenced use of L1 words and expressions in monolingual L1 contexts. Also, losing accessibility to L1 vocabularies in speaking and forgetting characters in writing both indicate that L1 lexicon is the most vulnerable section in Ruo's L1 ability, and it is easily affected by detaching with L1 context. As Hutz (2004) notes in a longitudinal study that 'lexicon is first and most severely affected by language attrition.' Turning to rarely used words and expressions, Ruo's attrition accords with research results on language contact. Köpcke and Schmid (2007) note that the amount of contact with L1 influences the psycholinguistic balance between the two languages. Due to lack of input and outside incentives, activating allusion storage became difficult for Ruo. However, this kind of attrition is easily to recover once immigrants back to their homelands (Footnick 2007). Except these lexical attritions mentioned by Ruo herself, I found several pragmatic attrition signs Ruo used for greetings:

你好吗? (How are you?)

周末愉快! (Have good weekends!)

The two widely used opening and ending sentences in English were transferred into Chinese conversations by Ruo. However, in Chinese context, 'how are you?' is more than a greeting but a questioning that should be answered because it contains speaker's concern. This sentence usually occurs when something truly happened. And 'have a good day' is a formal ending that always appears in business settings. The two sentences occurred in the interview setting are

not appropriate from the native-speaker's perspective. Some studies regard that L1 attrition would involve a loss of pragmatics competence (Pavlenko, 2000). And Ruo's less sensitive for the social meanings of L1 might be a sign for her L1 attrition.

Language Attitudes, Motivation and Use

In terms of listening and reading, Ruo expressed her strong confidences on them. She said:

'I am living in a Chinese (L1) community where neighbors are mainly Chinese speakers (including Cantonese, Taiwanese and other dialects). I watch Chinese TV shows, series and dramas in internet, read Chinese books and newspapers. I think Chinese (L1) is my domain language since I quitted from work. I almost talk to everyone in Chinese except my daughters.'

It is salient that keeping frequent and tight connection with Chinese language, society and culture is an important factor that makes Ruo being active in her L1. Sufficiently audio, visual and interactive L1 inputs help her to maintain the native awareness and ability despite decades' departure of homeland. It is evidenced a notion that attrition is be ascribed to lack of contact rather than to the actual length of time since onset of L1 attrition (Köpke & Schmid 2004). And her high proficiency level on L1 also corroborates the hypothesis that less attrition than expected is found if their subjects still had substantial contact with L1 (Schoenmakers 1989).

Speaking to language choice, Ruo thought she felt more comfortable with Chinese (L1) than English (L2), because she could express herself more precisely and effectively.

'I (Ruo) still think English is a foreign language even I have been Australian citizen for many years. When I speak English with accent and grammatical mistakes, I feel embarrassing and isolated because I am marked as an outsider of this society. Honestly, I cannot understand their (English speakers) jokes and senses of humor in most times. I, even, cannot express my angry or sadness with English. I think using of English can only satisfy the surface need of communication, while never reach my innermost feelings.'

To avoid negative feelings bought by L2, Ruo chooses to reduce the proportion of English using in her life, and relies mainly on Chinese. Emotional functions of languages are crucial motivations for Ruo to maintain her L1, and it might influence her process of attrition as suggestions from Pavlenko (2006) and Dorian (1982). Although affective factors cannot indicate Ruo's proficiency levels on two languages, it positively correlates with amount of language contact. Large amount of L1 contact slows down her L1 loss.

Speaking about her families, Ruo expressed her sadness about the language and identity barrier between generations. Ruo considered that her husband and her were still Chinese. This sense of national identify had already infiltrated into their blood which makes them feeling pride for Chinese culture, arts, history and achievement. They will feel thrilled when Chinese team won Olympic prize, but their daughters cannot feel in the same way. Ruo's strongly national identify and language preference reflect her willingness to maintain her original culture and language competence. It accords with Prescher (2007) research result that 'the longer the duration of immigration, the stronger the attempt to return to the original identity and language.' As one powerful driving force language use, positive language attitude explains Ruo's slight L1 attrition after decades' departure. Also, her upset on the generation cultural gap implies the needs of bilingual and bi-cultural education for the immigration groups. They hope their children could truly be a part of the society they lived in but also keep their cultural origin. Ruo's self-identity and expectation to the next generation support previous research suggestions that immigrants will used to their integrated identities and imperfect languages, and hope to fits themselves and their children into the 'new' home basing on their transcultural selves (Prescher 2007, McAdam 2003).

6. Conclusion

The scope of the present study rendered some clues for exploring adult immigrants' L1 attrition in bilingual context. First of all, this study verified the notion that lexicon is the most vulnerable section that is easily eroded by L2. Meanwhile, long-time immersion in L2 context could lead to unconsciously pragmatic deviation on L1 using. The accounts of this case also illustrated two essential affective factors on attrition: *age of onset to L1 attrition* and *amount of L1 contact*. Later departure (i.e. post-puberty) and substantial contact with L1 effectively hindered the extent and scope of L1 attrition. Besides, extra-linguistic factors play an important role in language loss as well. Particularly for adult immigrants whose self-identities and language preferences have already shaped. Their current language choice and use indicate their transcultural identities and selves' expectations. This case study helps to understand features and causes of L1 loss in adult immigration, and has implication on bilingual and bi-cultural education for immigration groups.

Future studies should pay more attention to psycholinguistics to explore the underlying causes of L1 attrition and maintenance in L2 context for adult immigrants. Especially within the information era, immersions of technology and internet break the geographic barrier to a large degree. Language, culture and identity are becoming more fluid and flexible than before. In the light of digital and global age, studies on L1 attrition needs to go back to human, concerning effects brought by individual's psychological status and cognitive process (Gürel 2007).

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