

Individual Native Language Attrition: The Wider Picture

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Recent research has focused on the concept of ‘interface’ between syntax and other cognitive systems as a predominant locus of instability in bilingual speakers. I address the question of what may cause instability in the native (L1) linguistic competence of individual speakers after long-term exposure to a second language (L2), in the light of three emerging generalizations. First, some specific interface phenomena have been found to be unstable in other bilingual populations, such as early simultaneous bilingual children and near-native L2 speakers. Second, some interfaces have been shown to present instability independently of the degree of typological similarity between the two languages known by bilingual speakers; other interfaces, in contrast, are problematic only for speakers of particular language combinations. Third, some interface phenomena also present instability in monolingual native speakers, albeit in more restricted circumstances. These facts suggest, first of all, that further distinctions should be made both among interfaces and among causes of interface instability. They also indicate that we should find ways of distinguishing—*theoretically and methodologically*—between representational and processing effects in attrition. An understanding of this distinction allows clearer insights on the differences between individual attrition effects in L1 speakers and longer-term effects in heritage speakers. Finally, I argue that no linguistic theory can by itself account for L1 attrition: we need to develop interdisciplinary models based on experimental evidence.