Book Review

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Incomplete Acquisition in Bilingualism: Re-examining the Age Factor effectively bridges a gap between the fields of bilingualism and second language acquisition through studies of the adult early bilingual. By examining age effects, Montrul addresses the similarities between adult early bilinguals and second language learners and the issue of non-native attainment. She asks if L2 acquisition and incomplete L1 acquisition are fundamentally distinct. The book’s eight chapters follow a clear trajectory, present useful case studies, and nicely integrate Montrul’s previous work. The author brings together foundational ideas in both SLA and bilingualism in her examination of L1 attrition, early childhood bilingualism, late childhood bilingualism, incomplete L1 acquisition in adults and, finally, a comparison between incomplete L1 and L2 acquisition in adults.

One of the book’s most significant contributions is that it explores L1 loss among early adult bilinguals in the context of L2 acquisition, utilizing age of acquisition as a macro-variable that connects L2 acquisition and L1 attrition. Montrul examines several key concepts in second language acquisition within the framework of the adult early bilingual and argues that these features are also typical of incomplete L1 acquisition in some early bilingual situations. These concepts include the Critical Period Hypothesis, L1 influence and fossilization, the role of innate knowledge, and the role of input.

Without necessarily drawing attention to it herself in these terms, it is important to note that Montrul’s work highlights the realities of bilinguals in a dual-language environment in which unequal power dynamics exist between the two languages. Montrul defines the “adult early bilingual” as a heritage speaker of a minority language who “never fully acquired, or lost, aspects of their first language sometime in childhood” (p. 1). These heritage speakers were exposed to the majority language either simultaneously, as in De Houwer’s 2009 study of bilingual first language acquisition, or as an early sequential bilingual. Yet, unlike De Houwer (2009), Montrul’s work explicitly focuses on a context in which the bilingual’s family language is the less prestigious minority language, as opposed to a situation of societal bilingualism or additive bilingualism. Montrul is interested in cases of unbalanced development and the fate of the weaker language, generally, the minority language, “particularly when the weaker language is the family language not fully supported in the community” (p. 93). This contextual distinction establishes the relevance of Montrul’s work to heritage language educators in minority language communities and I find it particularly relevant for Spanish heritage language education in the United States.

Chapter 1 begins with an exceptionally effective presentation of linguistic profiles of eight adult L2 learners and adult early bilinguals. These profiles serve as reference points throughout the book and immediately create concrete examples of incomplete L2 acquisition, incomplete L1 acquisition, and L1 loss. This strategy is helpful in providing cohesiveness to the linguistic concepts that Montrul presents.
throughout her work and the chapter also provides a concise summary of relevant research regarding language acquisition.

Chapter 2 explores characteristics of adult second language acquisition. Montrul highlights the differences and similarities between L1 acquisition by children and L2 acquisition by adults in a helpful table (p. 28) that she later revisits within the framework of heritage language acquisition in Chapter 7. Montrul also explains different perspectives regarding the explanation of age effects and differences in ultimate attainment in L2 acquisition. She highlights the critical period position, the no critical period position, implicit and explicit learning, and the role of memory. Montrul’s later arguments build on the concept of maturational constraints in L2 acquisition and the critical period position. Montrul closes Chapter 2 with two important hypotheses. Hypothesis 1 explains, “If L1 attrition occurs in children, it will be more severe than L1 attrition in adults. That is language loss, should be more dramatic in early than in late bilingualism.” Hypothesis 2 proposes, “If language attrition occurs within early (pre-puberty) bilingualism, it will be more severe in simultaneous bilinguals (exposed to the two languages very early) than in sequential bilinguals (when the L1 was acquired before the L2)” (p. 60). These hypotheses prove fundamental to Montrul’s study and guide the book’s remaining chapters.

Chapter 3 examines first language attrition in adult late bilinguals in order to compare it to the attrition that may occur in childhood among adult early bilinguals. The author claims that L1 loss in adults is relatively minor when compared to that of children, finding that attrition in adults primarily affects performance, particularly retrieval, but does not result in incomplete grammatical representations. Montrul underscores the importance of age of onset of bilingualism and suggests inverse parallels between L1-induced fossilization in the L2 and L2-induced attrition in the L1. Her analysis of L1 attrition in adult late bilinguals also references both the regression hypothesis and the activation threshold hypothesis to make sense of the simplification, regularization, redundancy, and other patterns present within the grammars of the L1 of adult late bilinguals. Montrul suggests that production is more affected by attrition than comprehension, arguing that L1 attrition in adult L2 learners, if any occurs, is small and difficult to attribute to a true loss of competence. She connects this conclusion to Hypothesis 1. This provides a nice point of departure from which to contrast the attrition that occurs in childhood highlighted in the next two chapters.

Chapter 4 examines bilingualism in early childhood. Montrul analyzes how language loss and acquisition interact in early bilingualism as a function of age and input when exposure to the two languages occurs during the critical period. Chapter 4 explains that because it is difficult to judge whether a child actually acquired a feature and then lost it, and because attrition in young children eventually leads to gaps in areas of grammatical knowledge that do not usually affect adults (such as morphology and syntax-related errors), the outcome of attrition in childhood can be conceptualized as incomplete acquisition. However, Montrul argues that studies of incomplete acquisition among early childhood bilinguals must test for both production and comprehension. She rightly points out that simply because a feature is not produced, does not necessarily mean that it is not understood or that it is absent from the child’s grammatical system. Montrul’s analysis advances previous research on attrition such as that of Silva-Corvalán (1994).

Additionally, in Chapter 4 Montrul proposes the weaker language as L1 hypothesis. She argues that we cannot artificially distinguish between and L1 and L2 among simultaneous bilinguals and claim
that Universal Grammar was fully available for the acquisition of one language and not the other. Montrul explains that the weaker language may lag behind in development and display incomplete acquisition, but it still maintains L1 features even into adulthood. This hypothesis could inform our work with lower proficiency heritage learners.

In Chapter 5, Montrul examines the continued language development that occurs within the school environment in later childhood. Most importantly, she proposes the existence of a critical period for L1 loss in bilingual children; the likelihood of L1 attrition decreases as children get older, and is very unlikely if first exposure to the L2 occurs after age 10. The corollary of the critical period is that the younger the exposure to the L2, the more severe the loss of the L1. This relationship implies that age of arrival predicts the degree of language loss and incomplete acquisition of heritage speakers, which is relevant when examining the proficiency levels of diverse heritage student populations within our classrooms.

Chapters 6 and 7 of Montrul’s book address the fate of the heritage language when these children become adults. They examine the long-term effects of incomplete acquisition and the structure of the heritage speaker’s language, continually reminding the reader of the heterogeneous nature of this adult early bilingual population. Montrul also emphasizes, again, that “age of L1 acquisition cannot be the entire explanation behind incomplete L1 knowledge in adulthood. Rather, it is age of onset of bilingualism and reduced exposure to the L1 input in these cases that matter most” (p. 165). Though heritage speakers may exhibit a weaker language with a reduced grammatical system that affects performance and competence, Montrul shows that core elements of the grammatical system are acquired solidly in childhood. This characteristic of L1 acquisition provides evidence for Montrul’s weaker language as L1 hypothesis. Chapter 7 concludes with a definition of heritage language acquisition as a hybrid between L1 and L2 acquisition. This is a noteworthy definition because it serves as an important point of departure for framing heritage language pedagogical strategies.

Chapter 8 advances three specific predictions related to comparisons in performance and attainment between heritage speakers and L2 learners. Overall, Montrul provides strong support for these predictions with multiple case studies. The first prediction is that “heritage speakers should have advantage over L2 learners with early acquired grammatical knowledge” (p. 220-1). Chapter 7 demonstrated that similar grammars do exist between L2 learners. However, studies such as Montrul (2005), among others, demonstrate that even “overhearers” and low proficiency heritage speakers have selective advantages over L2 learners due to the fact that heritage speakers set parameters of their weak L1 early in childhood. This supports her first prediction and confirms what we already know about the distinct pedagogical needs of heritage language learners (even those heritage learners of extremely low-proficiency and receptive bilinguals) as opposed to L2 learners (Valdés 1981, 1997; Potowski 2002, 2005).

Montrul’s third prediction, which is also well supported, addresses a re-exposure effect: heritage speakers “should react faster and better to instruction than L2 learners” (p. 220-221). Though her cited studies do show positive reactions to focused instruction, she concludes that more research is needed in this area. This prediction is exciting for those in the heritage language classroom because it illuminates specific grammatical areas that could potentially be reactivated for our students. If we know which areas respond best, we can design our curriculum around these areas and better serve our students.
Unfortunately, Montrul does not provide the level of support for her second prediction that she does for her first and third predictions. She predicts that “heritage speakers should be more accurate and faster than L2 learners in oral than in written production and comprehension tasks that minimize metalinguistic knowledge” (p. 220-1). Though she cites several studies in support of this prediction, she fails to account for heritage speakers of low-level proficiency. This missing piece is particularly noticeable due to the great attention she gives to this lower proficiency heritage speaker population in the context of her first prediction. The omission leads me to question how the outcome of her second prediction would have been affected if studies with less proficient and receptive adult bilinguals had been included.

There is an additional inconsistency within Montrul’s work that I would like to address. Montrul makes an important statement regarding the idea of balance as it pertains to bilinguals in Chapter 1. She states, “The reality is that most bilinguals are linguistically unbalanced, both functionally (in their language use) and representationally (in their linguistic knowledge). Bilingual speakers typically possess a stronger and a weaker language. However the relative strength of the two languages fluctuates along the lifespan depending on a variety of factors…” (p. 18). Yet, despite the acknowledgement of the unbalanced reality of most bilinguals, Montrul continues to mention the concept of a “balanced bilingual” quite often throughout the book. She references this balanced state as occurring at a certain point in childhood. It seems contradictory and problematic to reference a state of balanced bilingualism when Montrul herself stresses that all bilinguals are unbalanced to a certain extent.

Despite these two critiques, it is clear that Montrul’s book is an important contribution to not only SLA and bilingualism, but also to the field of heritage language development. The structure of her book, examples, and clear arguments are excellent and allow for application to the teaching of heritage language populations. Specifically, her conclusions regarding the relevance of the critical period for L1 attrition in a dual-language environment have useful implications for our teaching practices. Many Spanish heritage classrooms at the university level, in particular, have a population of students with mixed linguistic profiles. Some students may not have immigrated until late childhood (G1s or G1.5s1) and may have tested directly into the class without any previous coursework in the U.S. Others were born in the U.S. (G2s or G3s2). Understanding that the Spanish for the G1 and G1.5 students may not exhibit the same characteristics of attrition/incomplete acquisition as the G2 and G3 students is significant. This would, perhaps, call for an approach of differentiated instruction as in Peyton, Carreira, Wang, and Wiley (2008). Montrul’s work challenges heritage language educators to consider the research perspectives from second language acquisition and bilingualism in developing a heritage language pedagogy.

**References**


**Notes**

1. According to Silva-Corvalán (1994) study these students’ generation level would be categorized as G1s or G1.5s meaning that the students arrived in the U.S. after the age of 12 (G1) or between the ages of 6 and 12 (G1.5).

2. Again, according to Silva-Corvalán (1994), G2 students are those born in the U.S. to two G1 parents or students who arrived in the U.S. before the age of 5. G3 students are those born to at least one G2 parent.