
BOOK REVIEW: MONIKA S. SCHMID AND BARBARA KÖPKE (EDS.): THE OXFORD HANDBOOK OF LANGUAGE ATTRITION

(Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2019. 656 p.)

Flih Zahia
Multilingualism Doctoral School
zahia.flih@gmail.com
University of Pannonia

ABSTRAK

Tulisan ini merupakan review buku *The Oxford Handbook of Language Attrition*, edisi revisi oleh Monika S. Schmid dan Barbara Köpke (2019). Buku ini menjelaskan pemahaman tentang fenomena *language attrition*. Itu mencakup berbagai perspektif (Linguistik, psiko-neurolinguistik, dan Sociolinguistik) dari banyak ahli. Buku ini memberikan pandangan luas dan pemahaman mengenai bagaimana fenomena ini terjadi dan berbagai faktor yang mempengaruhi fenomena ini terjadi dan berkembang. Buku ini juga mendeskripsikan beberapa penelitian terdahulu di bidang lainnya yang telah dilakukan untuk memberikan petunjuk untuk penelitian-penelitian berikutnya.

Kata kunci: *Language attrition, Linguistik, psycho-nerolinguistik, sociolinguistik persfektif.*

ABSTRACT

The present paper reviews The Oxford Handbook of Language Attrition edited by Monika S. Schmid and Barbara Köpke (2019). The book is the first of its kind to provide a comprehensive account of the phenomenon of language attrition. It includes numerous experts in the field offering unique insights into the topic from various perspectives (linguistic, psycho-neurolinguistic, and sociolinguistic) so as to give the reader a holistic view and understanding of exactly how the phenomenon takes place and what different factors influence its occurrence and development. The book also draws on previous studies as well as other fields to present a guideline for future research.

Keywords: *Language attrition; Linguistic, psycho-neurolinguistic, sociolinguistic perspectives.*

DISCUSSION

The volume under review presents up-to-date research into the study of language attrition within the field of bilingualism. Language attrition refers to “the non-pathological decrease in proficiency in a language that had previously been acquired by an individual” (Köpke & Schmid, 2004, p. 3). *The Oxford Handbook of Language Attrition* includes leading scholars from all over the world dealing with a wide range of major topics in relation to the aforementioned phenomenon, mainly through examining its theoretical implications, psycho- and neurolinguistic approaches, linguistic as well as extra-linguistic factors affecting its occurrence and development.

The term language attrition was first coined nearly a century ago by the American linguist Haugen (1938) in his essay “*Language and Immigration*” to describe the deterioration of L1 skills during the lifespan of immigrants. In the following few decades, little attention was given to the topic until the beginning of 1980's with a conference in which language attrition received its first definition as the total loss of language skills (Lambert & Freed, 1982). Language attrition increasingly grew to become an independent field of study and a fertile ground for research with various scholars approaching the topic from the viewpoints of other disciplines, the likes of psychology, biology, and

neurology, widening the scope of study beyond its linguistic borders.

Considering the structure of the present compilation, the handbook consists of a total page count number of 656, making it the most comprehensive book to ever discuss this area of research at such length. The book's length reflects the authors' intents and attempts to cover every aspect of attrition phenomena and to be as inclusive as possible so as to give the reader a broad sense of the topic from various perspectives. The book begins with an introductory chapter written by the book's editors, Monika Schmid and Barbara Köpke, followed by thirty-nine chapters distributed over six sections.

In the introduction, the book provides a historical overview of language attrition, and how the phenomenon developed over the years to become a significant area of research. The authors also reference the numerous obstacles for future research and call for creating a common methodological framework of investigation so as to render comparison between the different studies in the field easier and more reliable. In this vein, the framework represents a unified structure for collecting the background features and language proficiency data to be adopted by all studies, regardless of their different aims and linguistic interests. What is more, the authors emphasise the importance of researching language attrition in tandem with

other phenomena such as language acquisition, taking into account the languages that are already present within individuals' minds or their environment.

The first section entitled "*Theoretical Implications of Language Attrition*" approaches language attrition from a rather theoretical standpoint. The section consists of five chapters with each introducing a theory or model that attempts to account for the phenomenon of attrition. The first chapter sheds light on the *Competition Model*, which, according to MacWhinney, can serve as an integrated and holistic approach to account for numerous issues in language attrition. The second chapter includes the *Feature Reassembly Hypothesis* which asserts that the attrition and restructuring which a language undergoes is the result of both a reduction in the connections between its various sub-levels as well as the insertion of new mappings and structures from another language (L2).

In the third chapter, the authors present the *Interface Hypothesis* as a framework for studying L1 attrition. The idea is that structures at the interface between syntax and other cognitive areas like pragmatics are more prone to attrition than those which do not comprise an interface with any other cognitive domains. In this vein, the hypothesis affirms that L1 attrition causes a reduction in the ability to process the interface structures, and consequently

hinders the recuperation or "reversibility" of the language. The fourth chapter discusses the implications of the *Bottleneck Hypothesis* for language attrition. The hypothesis compares the degree of acquisition of syntax, semantics and morphology among early and late attriters and finds that functional morphology constitutes the most challenging area to acquire in comparison with syntax and semantics. The final chapter explores a *Complex Dynamic Systems perspective* with regards to the various personal background variables of L1 attrition. Opitz, the author of the chapter, highlights the role of background variables such as, age of L2 acquisition, attitudes towards a language, level of education as well as the frequency and recency of language use in language attrition and emphasises the inclusion of these factors in studies of language attrition which could facilitate the comparison of findings.

Unlike the first section which discusses language attrition from a theoretical perspective, the second section tackles the phenomenon from an experimental viewpoint by introducing the different "*Psycholinguistic and Neurolinguistic Approaches to Language Attrition*". The authors begin with an introduction that presents the brain processes and mechanisms, theories, and hypotheses in order to pave the way for the eight chapters that follow. For starters, the second

chapter examines the language processing mechanisms in attrition, and how these mechanisms interact with other cognitive processes leading to a change in how knowledge and language are represented. Moving to the third chapter, the authors attempt to reveal whether the phenomenon of attrition represents the mere loss of a language, or instead, it is the by-product of the active interactions between languages within a bi/multilingual mind due to various processes and mechanisms such as immersion, forgetting and memory retrieval. The fourth chapter studies how bilingualism affects syntactic processing in the native language. In this respect, the authors advocate the use of eye-movement tracking technique in the study of attrition. The next chapter discusses the relation between L1 attrition and Developmental Language Disorder (DLD) by looking for any overlap in their effects and influence amongst bilingual children who are raised in a migrant environment. Afterwards, chapter six studies whether the phenomenon of language attrition among older adults living in a non-native environment is the result of a decrease in their L1 use, or partially due to the process of aging and all the neuro-physiological decay that accompanies it. Falling in a relatively similar scope of the previous chapter, chapter seven examines the linguistic regression in bilingual patients with

Alzheimer's Disease (AD). Herein, the authors scrutinize the Babylonian Benefit which affirms that bilingualism delays AD and protects against its effects. Moreover, the chapter probes the various linguistic difficulties that bilinguals with AD encounter. In chapters eight and nine, the authors call for incorporating the Electrophysiological Approaches as well as Neuroimaging techniques in the study of L1 attrition respectively.

The third section explores the various linguistic factors in language attrition. The section begins with an introductory chapter followed by an examination of what the author describes as 'phonetic drift' in the second chapter. According to Chang, phonetic drift refers to "L2-influenced phonetic change in an individuals' L1 system" (p. 191). The third chapter does not venture far from the second as the author introduces the numerous changes in L1 speech upon the acquisition of a new language or dialect as phonetic attrition. The fourth chapter moves beyond the notion of phonetic production to probe phonological attrition and how phonological contrasts may also be prone to change upon the acquisition of an L2. The fifth chapter encompasses morphological attrition in terms of derivational and inflectional morphology from perspectives of the *Activation Threshold Hypothesis*, *Interface Hypothesis*, and the *4-M Model*. Moreover, the sixth chapter defines lexical

attrition and introduces the three hypotheses (dormant language hypothesis, threshold hypothesis, and interference hypothesis) which account for why, where, when, and how it occurs. Lastly, the seventh chapter addresses the attrition of L1 pronominals among late bilinguals who acquired and used the second tongue for an extended period of time upon their immigration.

The next section discusses extra-linguistic factors that are considered to exert an impact on the extent of language attrition. After introducing the section, the age factor is examined in relation to language attrition. Particularly, the second chapter inspects how susceptibility to attrition changes according to age and how other factors counterbalance its effects. The third chapter studies the significance and effect of frequency of use and length of residence on L1 attrition, while the fourth chapter tackles L1 attrition in tandem with the acquisition and development of the L2 among late bilinguals. The study comes at the conclusion that L1 attrition is by no account indicative of a heightened level of proficiency of the second, but rather the two languages exist in a “super-system” in which they affect one another on numerous levels. Finally, the last chapter explores the phenomenon of language contact in relation to various language settings the likes of lexical transference, processes of semantic restructuring, syntactic transference/convergence, and

morphological/phonological transfer.

The fifth section of the handbook is devoted to second language attrition as addressed in the introduction. As a starting point, the second chapter examines the extra-linguistic factors in L2 attrition, and how these factors contribute to its occurrence and development. The following chapter inspects the existence of a critical period of L2 acquisition for areas such as syntax and phonology and the extent to which these areas are prone to L2 attrition. Moving forth, chapter four discusses L2 lexical attrition and proposes a platform for future research in this very topic by presenting the Meara’s *Constant Decay Hypothesis*. Last but not one, the fifth chapter examines a number of studies of L2 attrition conducted on Japanese returnees. Finally, the last chapter encompasses a study conducted on adult L1 English speakers who enrolled to study Finnish as a second language using Event-related Potentials as metrics. The study revealed that as acquisition progresses, learners moved from a lexical processing mode to a grammatical one, but reversed back once instruction was concluded.

The sixth and last section discusses the area of language attrition of heritage speakers. First and foremost, the initial chapter serves as an introduction to *heritage language development*, while the second investigates language experience

as a key factor in heritage language development by reviewing the parental questionnaire, which represents the most widely used method of research in quantifying bilingual language experience. Chapter three entitled “*Intra-Generational Attrition: Contributions to heritage speaker competence*” maintains that heritage speakers’ differences might be attributed to differences in the input of the heritage language in comparison to that received by monolinguals. The authors claim that the attrition experienced by the first generation of immigrants partially contributes to these changes and shifts in L1 input and, consequently, to heritage speakers’ differences. Moving to the next subsection, chapter four discusses simultaneous bilinguals as a subtype of heritage speakers (HSs). In that account, the author explores the different acquisition outcomes of developing heritage bilinguals and adult HSs on the one hand, and monolinguals on the other taking into account factors such as cross-linguistic influence, age of onset, input and language dominance, as well as distance to the homeland. In chapter five, L1 attrition and retention among internationally adopted (IA) children is discussed in an attempt to understand (IA) children’s neuroplasticity and language acquisition as well as how the attrition or retention of their L1 might influence their language processing. Chapter six investigates *childhood language memory in adult heritage*

language (re)learners. Along this line, the authors unveil that childhood acquisition of a heritage language constitutes an advantage for later language (re)learners in comparison to those who had no prior acquisition or exposure to their heritage language. In the last chapter, the author inspects language development among bilingual returnees (second or third generation ex-migrants), who lived for an extended period of time in a foreign environment and returned to their original country (or their parents’). In this vein, the chapter sheds light on the consequences of the loss of contact with the dominant language as well as the increasing exposure to and input of the heritage language upon returning.

Ultimately, Kees de Bot brings the book to an end by providing a number of concluding remarks and comments on its content. The author discusses the rise and development of language attrition into an esteemed and independent field of study. Moreover, he reviews the various topics and studies included in the book with a reference to their results. What is more, de Bot alludes to several problematic issues and calls for further exploration of some under-researched topics in the field.

On the whole, *The Oxford Handbook of Language Attrition* provides a comprehensive study to attrition phenomena from a variety of perspectives with

insights from theoretical linguistics, psycho- and neurolinguistics, and sociolinguistics. In its entirety, the book covers a wide range of interesting topics in relation to the attrition field, which grant the reader an opportunity to explore the aforementioned area of research in a holistic yet captivating manner.

Moving forward, the various sections and subsections of the book are clear, informative, and well-organized, and the different concepts in every part are efficiently presented. What is more, the language is by no means complex and difficult to comprehend and the flow of ideas is swift and logical, which helps deliver the subject matter to readers, even if they had little to no prior knowledge about the topic at hand.

Unlike many previous publications about the topic, this volume does not address language attrition from only a theoretical point of view or a practical one, but rather explores it from both standpoints taking into account the conceptual knowledge as well as the experimental findings, which allows for a better understanding of the nature, development and implications of the attrition phenomena. Moreover, the book imparts answers to various questions which eluded researchers for years. This breakthrough could be attributed to the incorporation of previously neglected fields of study in

attrition research. What is more, the handbook represents a valuable resource and a suitable guide not only for new scholars in the field of linguistics, but also for researchers from other disciplines such as medicine and psychology.

Despite the wide range of attrition-related issues covered in this volume, some relevant areas of study such as, the attrition of non-verbal communication (gestures) as well as sign language were marginalized. In the concluding remarks of the book, Kees de Bot affirms that research on the existence of what he described as "gestural drift" - the attrition of language and culture specific gestures over time- is massively scarce. Moreover, de Bot also argues that sign language exhibits similar patterns of crosslinguistic interference which makes it a fertile ground for future attrition research despite the various limitations.

In a nutshell, I highly recommend being familiar with the rich content of this book as, not only would it introduce readers to the field of language attrition, but it would also expand their knowledge and views about the topic towards new horizons.

REFERENCES

- Haugen, E. (1938). Language and immigration. *Norwegian-American Studies*, 10(1), 1-43.

Köpke, B., & Schmid, M. S.
(2004). Language attrition:
The next phase. In M.S.
Schmid, B. Köpke, M.
Keijer, & L. Weilemar (Eds.).
*First Language Attrition:
Interdisciplinary
Perspectives on
Methodological Issues* (pp.
1–43). Amsterdam: John
Benjamins.

Lambert, R.D., & Freed, B.F.
(Eds.). (1982). *The Loss of
Language Skills*. Rowley,
MA: Newbury House.