

Identity and first language attrition: A historical approach

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Abstract

This paper presents some of the findings of a study on first language attrition of German in an anglophone context. It is based on a corpus of narrative autobiographical interviews with 35 German Jews who emigrated from Germany under the Nazi regime. In recent years, issues of identity theory have figured largely within research on both bilingualism at large and language attrition specifically. Within this context, the situation of German Jews is a unique one: it is very rare that a minority is persecuted by a majority with the same native language. It is to be hypothesized that this situation of forced emigration and brutal persecution led to identity conflicts which, for some of the informants, resulted in a wish to distance themselves from Germany, the Germans and consequently also the German language. The results of this study suggest that for some interviewees the breaks their identity had suffered were too deep to make reconciliation with any part thereof (whether Jewish or German) possible, to the extent that they adopted the language and identity of their country of emigration as their own. In turn, others were able to keep a fairly native-like command of German. This paper will take a closer look at some aspects of persecution, and attempt to link these to individual language attitudes. Qualitative and quantitative aspects of language loss and language preservation will be presented. It will be shown that the breakdown of a language system after sixty years of non-use or restricted use is to a large degree determined by personal attitudes.

Key-words: attrition, attitude, identity, persecution, methodology.

Resumo

Este artigo presenta algúns dos resultados dun estudo realizado sobre a perda do alemán como primeira lingua nun contexto anglófono. Está baseado nun corpus de narracións autobiográficas procedentes de entrevistas con trinta e cinco xudeus alemáns que emigraron de Alemaña baixo o réxime nazi. Nos últimos anos, os temas de teoría da identidade preséntanse moi relacionados tanto co bilingüismo en xeral como coa perda lingüística en

particular. Neste contexto, a situación dos xudeus alemáns é única: é moi raro que unha minoría sexa perseguida por unha maioría que teña a mesma lingua nativa. A hipótese manexada é que esta situación de emigración forzada e de persecución brutal levou a conflitos de identidade que, para algúns dos informantes, se traduciron nunha arela de distanciamento de Alemaña, dos alemáns e, en consecuencia tamén da lingua alemana. Os resultados deste estudo suxiren que para unha parte dos entrevistados as brechas que sufriron as súas identidades foron demasiado fondas como para que calquera reconciliación con elas fose posíbel (tanto coa identidade xudea coma coa alemá), ata o punto de que porfillaron como propias a lingua e a identidade do país de adopción. Pola contra, outros foron quen de manter unha aceptábel competencia nativa en alemán. Este traballo vaise achegar a algúns dos aspectos da persecución, e tentará relacionalos coas actitudes lingüísticas individuais. Así mesmo, presentaranse distintos aspectos cualitativos e cuantitativos da perda e o mantemento lingüísticos. Mostraremos que o fracaso dun sistema lingüístico despois de sesenta anos de non-uso, ou de uso restrinxido, está determinado en gran medida polas actitudes persoais.

Palabras clave: perda de linguas, actitude, identidade, persecución, metodoloxía.

1. Introduction

The papers presented at the colloquium on ‘Language and emotions’ at the *2nd University of Vigo International Symposium on Bilingualism*, and the articles collected in the present volume, provide ample evidence for the fact that a bilingual’s different languages can be linked to emotive factors, which may lead to one or the other language being preferred in certain, emotionally marked, situations. The present paper investigates a situation where such an emotionally charged relationship with a first language is carried to its extremes: a case where, due to extreme traumatization, speakers cease to want to use their first language (L1) —in any situation.

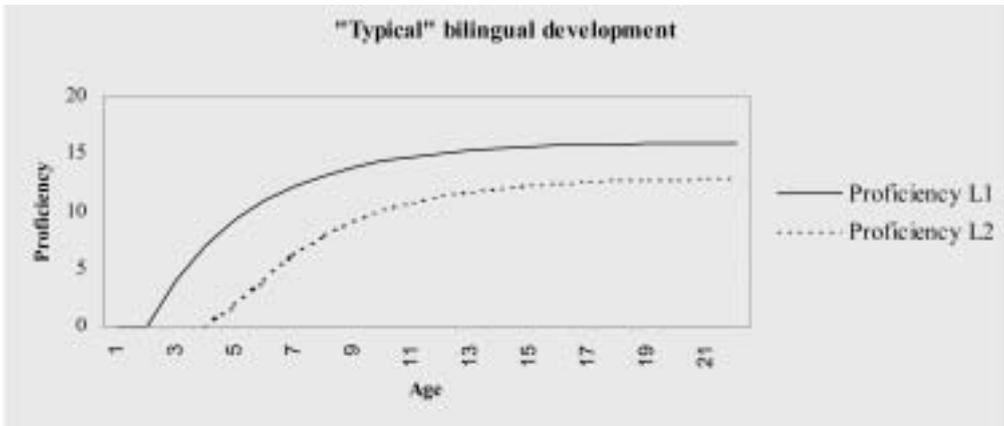
It has often been pointed out that in situations of persecution, a symbolic link between the oppressive regime and/or hostile society and the majority language may be made by the victims of persecution (e.g. Clyne, 1981: 64; Romaine, 1989: 43). However, persecuted minorities are often also linguistic minorities, for whom this language will not be the language of their home and family. An exception to this is the case of assimilated German Jews under the Nazi regime. This paper presents a study of L1 attrition in this group, investigating German proficiency of 35 German Jews who emigrated in the period between 1933 and 1939 and have lived in English-speaking countries ever since. It will show how traumatic experiences can lead a speaker towards a rejection of her first language that may eventually result in diminished proficiency.

2. Language attrition

The situation of bilingual development studied here is slightly different from the one usually investigated in bilingualism research. Typically, this area of linguistic

study is concerned with some variation of the situation schematically depicted in Figure 1. There are a great many possible differences between the way in which the curves representing L1 and second language (L2) can look in relation to each other—the starting point can be further apart on the age-axis (late bilingualism), closer together (early bilingualism) or be identical (simultaneous bilingualism), the L2 curve can get close to the L1 curve on the proficiency axis (native-like bilingualism) etc. However, the inherent assumption in studying first or second language acquisition is that proficiency will increase.

Figure 1



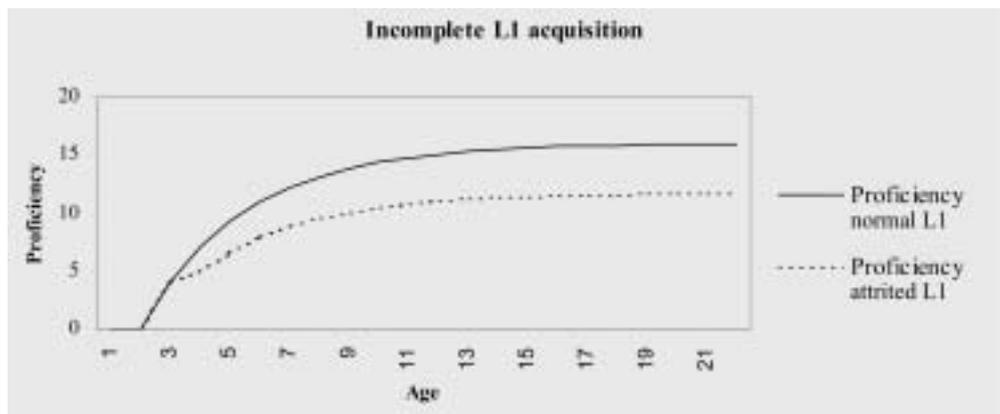
Language attrition, on the other hand, asks whether it is possible for the acquisitional curve to acquire a negative slope at some point, i.e. for 'loss' in the loosest sense to occur (Figure 2).

Figure 2



This distinction may seem very basic and obvious, but in recent years studies on attrition have often not properly distinguished this situation from incomplete acquisition, the process represented in Figure 3.

Figure 3



This is especially problematic in the large body of studies investigating L1 attrition among children, especially when no monolingual control group of a similar age is established (for a detailed overview and discussion of this problem see Köpke & Schmid, 2004). I would argue that definitions that subsume incomplete acquisition under the phenomenon we label attrition (Polinsky, 1994: 257) are less than helpful, since it is precisely the negative slope of the acquisitional curve that is interesting to our investigation: we want to know if there is anything to be observed in this part of the curve that can give us insights that cannot be gained from the situation represented in Figure 1.

Research on first language attrition should therefore look at speakers who have completed the process of L1 acquisition (at least where the variables under investigation are concerned) and then at some point in their adolescent or adult lives moved to a different linguistic environment, where they ceased or almost ceased using their L1. Reports from different studies of L1 attrition affirm that there are striking differences among such speakers where the self-perceived ‘proficiency’ retained after years or decades of non-use is concerned.

3. Attitude and attrition

Language attrition has been studied from a variety of different linguistic, sociolinguistic and ethnolinguistic angles (for an overview see Schmid & de Bot, 2004). For the purpose of this paper, the perspective on attrition will be confined to the impact of language attitudes on the attritional process.

It is hardly surprising that attitude has been an important issue for language attrition studies from the beginning. Since it has been shown that attitude and motivation are among the key determining factors for the success of L2 acquisition, it seems reasonable to investigate their role within the framework of attrition as well. From a common-sense perspective, this is an obviously promising area: L1 attrition, as defined above, is a phenomenon that takes place in the context of emigration, a situation which almost invariably involves a re-assessment of identity, belonging, group membership, etc. In this respect, language proficiency and use are among the most immediately obvious defining features (see e.g. Le Page & Tabouret-Keller, 1985), and they are also among the markers of identity that the individual can (to some extent at least) control —unlike, for example, skin color.

One important factor in this respect is that the emigrant, who may have been part of the mainstream population prior to emigration, now is a ‘foreigner’, part of the outgroup. While groups consider themselves as stratified, they are often viewed as homogenous from the outside (Breakwell, 1983: 191). Thus, while an individual might have perceived herself as belonging to a social class with a certain social prestige while still in the country of her origin, after emigration she may find attitudes towards her influenced by stereotyped notions associated with ‘immigrants’ or ‘immigrants of a certain ethnolinguistic background’. Almost invariably, the social status of an immigrant is lower than her status in the country of origin (Yağmur, 1997: 31).

Being thus suddenly (and often unexpectedly) downgraded by members of the majority community may obviously cause the desire on the part of the immigrant for complete assimilation. In order to achieve that, she may reject her native language in an attempt to acquire native-like competence in her L2, a foreign accent being one of the more notable indications of her immigrant status. If, on the other hand, she still feels comfortable with or even proud of her origins, she may wish to be perceived as a member of the community of immigrants from her country of origin, and even ‘flaunt’ her bilingual competence or non-native command of the dominant language.

Over the past decades, socio- and ethnolinguists have often concerned themselves with these kinds of situations, as is evident in the works of, among others, Fishman (1989), Le Page and Tabouret-Keller (1985), or scholars associated with the notion of ethnolinguistic vitality (e.g., Bourhis, Giles & Rosenthal, 1981; Giles, Bourhis & Taylor, 1977). All of these frameworks attempt to measure the slippery and elusive, yet undoubtedly vital phenomenon of where an individual positions herself within a multilingual or multiethnic community. This entails the attempt to determine which aspects of her own person, history, loyalty and association she thinks most salient, most representative of her ‘true self’.

It seems intuitively convincing that language attrition will, at least to some extent, be determined by these factors. The same circumstances that favor acquisition of the L2 may lead to an avoidance of situations where the L1 is used.

The fact that input from the L1 is thus dramatically reduced has often been invoked as the determining factor in attrition (e.g., Köpke, 2004). What is more difficult is the question of how to establish this in a scientifically sound and testable framework.

One of the first larger studies that attempted to investigate this phenomenon was Margit Waas' dissertation on the L1 attrition of German in Australia (Waas, 1996). Waas structured her approach by making a subdivision of her informants along two criteria: the first was whether the informant was 'merely' a permanent resident of Australia, or a naturalized citizen. The second criterion was what Waas called 'ethnic affiliation', a term she used to describe any kind of active involvement with German-speaking organisations such as clubs, churches, etc. Ethnic affiliation was also assumed to obtain for informants who were married to a native speaker of German (unless they reported that they used English with each other) as well as for people who used German professionally (Waas, 1996: 63). Waas' study is to a very large degree based on self-reports about the use of the language as well as preferences for one or the other language in different situations, attitudes towards German, and can-do scales. For most of these factors her classification yields positive results: the difference, for example, in the reports on her can-do scales shows that members of her 'ethnically affiliated' group (*ea*) rate their proficiency in German significantly higher than the 'ethnically non-affiliated' group (*ena*) (Waas, 1996: 101). The self-report data on language use also seem to show that the *ea* group uses German more than the *ena* group (Waas, 1996: 124). However, since the question on the use of German in Australia includes the contexts 'at home', 'at work', 'at church' and 'in the club', i.e. the selection criteria that were used to divide *ea* and *ena* groups in the first place, this result is hardly surprising. Furthermore, Waas detected differences in the stated attitudes towards German between her four groups (Waas, 1996: 131).

The single linguistic test Waas performed, a Fluency in Controlled Association (FiCA) test, did not, however, yield significant differences in the number of German lexical items her different groups of subjects were able to produce in a certain time (Waas, 1996: 111). In other words, ethnic affiliation proved only significant in relation to how her informants rated their own behaviour and proficiency, as well as in how they stated their attitudes towards their L1—not for their actual performance. It is possible that this failure of Waas' framework to account for actual attrition is linked to the restricted nature of the tests she did. On the other hand, the FiCA test attempts to assess the nature and accessibility of the mental lexicon, which has been taken to be among the language areas most vulnerable to attrition (Andersen, 1982: 114).

Kutlay Yağmur, in his Ph.D. dissertation on the L1 attrition of Turkish in Sydney, attempted to put the elusive attitudinal factors into a more fine-tuned, quantifiable framework, namely that developed by Ethnolinguistic Vitality Theory (EVT) (Giles, Bourhis & Taylor, 1977). In order to do that, he used the Subjective

Ethnolinguistic Vitality Questionnaire (SEVQ) developed by Bourhis, Giles & Rosenthal (1981), as well as the ‘traditional’ EVT factors of status, demographic, and institutional support. Like Waas, Yağmur measured attrition by self-reports on language use, choice, and attitudes, can-do-scales, and a FiCA test. In addition to that, he used a syntactic test in which informants were required to produce relative clauses (a complex structure that is acquired very late in L1 Turkish) and a re-telling of *Frog, Where Are You?* (Mayer, 1969).

Again, Yağmur’s statistical analysis reveals interesting correlations: the subjects’ self-reports on the use of Turkish correlate not only with their attitudes to this language, but also with their self-evaluation, which in turn correlates with the performance on one of his two lexical naming tests and the syntactic test (Yağmur, 1997: 93), indicating that his informants probably have better than average skills of self-evaluation.

However, while Yağmur’s analysis of the linguistic data is meticulous and his statistical analysis impeccable, it fails to uncover any correlation between the level of attrition which he detects for individuals in comparison with monolingual Turks, and perceived ethnolinguistic vitality (Yağmur, 1997: 93). These findings dealt a nasty blow to those of us who had been hoping to turn to EVT for salvation from the messiness of measuring attitudes and attrition.

Yağmur’s findings are further corroborated by Madeleine Hulsen’s study on the attrition of Dutch in New Zealand across three generations (Hulsen, 2000). She, too, administered a language use questionnaire and the SEVQ, however, she augmented this by a social network questionnaire. Her linguistic analysis is based on can-do scales, and processing experiments on picture naming and picture-word matching tasks. Again, it is a meticulously conducted study, but the outcome is that “language contact across the networks seems to have little impact on language processing” (Hulsen, 2000: 183), and that “the perceived *Dutch* vitality did not contribute significantly to predicting any of the language processing variables” (Hulsen, 2000: 186, her emphasis).

The findings from these three studies seem to underscore that socio- and ethnolinguistic frameworks that rely on subjects’ self reports about their use of and attitude towards their L1 seem to be inadequate tools for the prediction of the linguistic aspects of language attrition: subjective evaluation at the current point in time cannot establish a link between attrition and concepts such as identity.

This may conceivably be due to the fact that people’s identity, affiliation and self-concept do not remain stable across the lifespan (Breakwell, 1986: 18). Obviously, if a connection between attitudes or identities and attrition is to be found, it would have to be looked for at the moment of emigration, i.e. at the possible onset of attrition.

If corroborating evidence could be found for such an assumption, it would indicate that research on attrition is still more difficult than currently imagined. To

adequately conduct research on the impact of identity, very long-term research designs would have to be developed, testing subjective identity and language proficiency at the time of emigration and re-testing both after a span of at least ten years.

The operational and financial difficulties involved in such longitudinal projects have often been pointed out. It would therefore be a valuable step if a link between attrition and identity could be pointed out *a priori*, indicating the possible value of such studies.

Since it is not possible to travel back in time to research the identity of present day ‘attriters’, the current study observes language attrition among a group of refugees whose circumstances prior to their emigration have —for very tragic reasons— been thoroughly documented.

4. A historical approach

In addition to such factors as attitudes and contacts that the studies presented in the previous section analysed, it is conceivable that an important factor influencing attrition or maintenance of the first language in emigration might be the reason or circumstances that led to the emigration. In cases where a persecuted minority had no choice but leave their country of origin, it has often been speculated that a rejection of elements of identity associated with that country might ensue (cf. Clyne, 1981: 64; Romaine, 1989: 43). Especially in cases where the minority, prior to emigration, was part of the same linguistic community as the majority, such a conflict could very well influence first language attrition.

20th century history knows one group of people for whom this was the case: those German Jews who, prior to the Nazi regime and the genocide, had formed an integrated part of German society, and who were forced into emigration by the increasingly severe measures of persecution. This minority was well on its way towards being entirely assimilated and integrated into the dominant majority (cf. Herz, 1984: 19), when a brutal shift in the attitude of the majority occurred, which affected every part of their lives —among other things, freedom of choice of occupation, legal status, freedom of choice of the partner— and, eventually, denied them the right to live.

The attitudes towards Germany and the German language among the survivors span the entire spectrum. The fact that there were some who were not entirely uprooted and alienated from their German identity was most famously expressed in Thomas Mann’s legendary “Wo ich bin, ist Deutschland” (‘Wherever I am is Germany’). The other extreme is represented by the equally decisive rejection by a former citizen of Düsseldorf: “When the war broke out [...] I vowed that I would not speak, write nor read German ever again” (quoted in Schmid, 2002: 71).

Both of these cases are examples of a dramatically changed external situation that made it necessary for individuals to reconstruct elements of their identity. The Nazi regime made it very clear to every German Jew that they were no longer welcome, and essentially denied them the right to identify themselves as Germans. When such a severance is effected on the part of a dominant majority, it seems that there are two possible ways of coping left to the minority. The first of these is the ‘Thomas Mann’ strategy, which refuses to let itself be robbed of its national identity and conversely and logically denies it to the barbarians that now populate one’s home country. The other extreme is to say, “If that’s what being German is, I want no part of it”. Which of these two strategies an individual chooses, and to what extent, may be influenced by personal experiences, in particular by the degree of persecution that he or she was subjected to.

The persecution of Jews under the Nazi regime was not a process that started immediately and in full force after the Nazi seizure of power (*Machtübernahme*). The erosion of legal and civil rights that eventually culminated in the genocide was a gradual one, and it was clearly characterized by several phases.

During the first phase from January 1933 to August 1935, persecution was focused on and aimed towards Jews in public life. Within months of the *Machtübernahme*, boycotts against Jewish shops and businesses were organized, and Jewish doctors, lawyers and judges lost their licenses under the ‘law for the re-establishment of the professional civil service’ (*Gesetz zur Wiederherstellung des Berufsbeamtentums*), which stated that all civil servants of ‘non-Aryan descent’ were to be retired, unless they had held their positions since before August 1914 or were the fathers or sons of soldiers who had died in World War I (Hilberg, 1961: 54; Walk, 1981: 12; Woelk, 1997a: 61, 1997b: 176). Further laws and regulations to exclude German Jews from certain professions and restrict their educational opportunities were to follow.

It was thus at a very early stage of the Nazi regime that anti-Semitism came to pervade almost every aspect of daily and public life for the Jewish population, not only because of the laws and regulations that were passed but also through the changes in behavior, the open aggression, of large parts of the non-Jewish population. At this stage, however, many people still felt that it would all soon blow over, that it could not possibly get any worse than it already was. Those who did emigrate during this early period usually did so because they belonged to one of the (comparatively small) professional groups for whom the continuation of either their occupation or of their education had become impossible (Hilberg, 1992: 138).

It was in September 1935 that the persecution entered a new and more radical stage, as the Nuremberg racial laws (*Nürnberger Rassengesetze*) were passed: the ‘citizenship law’ (*Reichsbürgergesetz*), the ‘law for the protection of German blood and German honor’ (*Gesetz zum Schutze des deutschen Blutes und der deutschen Ehre*) augmented in October 1935 by the ‘law for the protection of the genetic health

of the German people' (*Gesetz zum Schutze der Erbgesundheit des deutschen Volkes*). These laws were fundamental to the subsequent measures of persecution in that they made a clear and basic distinction between the rights of 'people of German or related blood' and 'people of foreign blood', namely Jews, Gypsies, Blacks, etc. The citizenship law essentially established two classes of citizenship according to this 'racial' distinction, assigning those who were not considered 'Aryans' an inferior status, resembling that of foreigners. While this status was 'defined' predominantly in the citizenship law, it laid the foundation for all subsequent laws that were specifically discriminatory against these groups.

This distinction between 'races' was applied in the other two laws mentioned above, in that 'Aryans' were no longer allowed to marry or have sexual relations with 'non-Aryans', and infractions of these laws were defined as 'racial disgrace' (*Rassenschande*), a criminal offense. The subsequent years were characterized by a continually increasing persecution and exclusion from public life, and

[i]n the course of the next few years the machinery of destruction was turned on Jewish 'wealth'. In increasing numbers, one Jewish family after another discovered that it was impoverished. [...] The Jews were deprived of their professions, their enterprises, their financial reserves, their wages [...]. We shall refer to this process as 'expropriation'.
(Hilberg, 1961: 54)

It was in 1938 that the climate changed substantially. This was a process that began with the *Anschluss* on March 12th, the date when Austria became a part of Germany, and the attending surge of nationalist and anti-Semitic feelings (Rieker & Zimmermann, 1998: 235). Then, in late 1938, two events took place that were of an entirely different nature from anything that had happened so far. The first of these was the deportation of all Jews of Polish citizenship to Poland, subsequent to a declaration by the Polish government that all citizens who had not been to Poland for more than five years would lose their status as citizens on October 31st. Among those who were deported were the parents of Herschel Grynzpan, a German Jew living in Paris. On November 7th 1938, he shot a member of the German embassy, vom Rath, whose death gave a convenient excuse for the pogrom of Nov. 9th, which has come to be known as *Reichskristallnacht*. In what were supposed to be 'spontaneous uprisings', organized groups of mainly SA-men (storm troopers) but also civilians destroyed more than 1,000 synagogues and 7,500 houses and businesses during that night. While 91 people were killed according to official records, the actual numbers are almost certainly much higher than that. More than 30,000 were arrested and taken to the concentration camps Buchenwald, Sachsenhausen, and Dachau (Rieker & Zimmermann, 1998: 245).

This was a turning point. It was no longer a matter of laws and regulations; virtually everyone who experienced that night came to feel what it was like to be in immediate danger of their lives.

After Nov. 9th 1938, the segregation of Jews took on a new force and pace, laws and decrees being passed which made the process of expropriation complete. After Germany had invaded Poland on Sept. 1st 1939, thus starting World War II, the Jewish population was quickly stripped of what remaining rights they had. They lost all professional opportunities. Jewish children were no longer allowed to attend non-Jewish schools. Jewish men were compelled to do forced labor. Jews were made to give up their houses and apartments and live in special ‘Jewish houses’ (*Judenhäuser*). They no longer had the right to read the daily newspapers, own a radio or a telephone or even use public telephones. They were only allowed to do their shopping at special times. And from September 19th 1941 onwards, they had to wear the ‘yellow star’ that marked them as Jewish in public. In October 1941, deportations to Poland started (Rieker & Zimmermann, 1998: 250).

On January 20th 1942, in a committee-meeting that has come to be known as *Wannseekonferenz*, 15 high officials decided on how to organize and administer the deportation and genocide of European Jews.

The process by which the status of German Jews was changed from one of legal equality and social assimilation to one of outcasts who had lost all rights including the right to live, can therefore be seen to have progressed in three clearly defined and distinct phases:

- a) January 1933 – August 1935, where the persecution was aimed at the exclusion of Jews from public life;
- b) August 1935 – September 1938, where activities were targeted at clearly defining Jews as a group, i.e. as outsiders and ‘Non-Germans’ as well as at their dispossession;
- c) November 1938 – May 1945: the genocide.

5. The study

The study of first language attrition upon which this paper is based used a corpus of 35 narrative autobiographical interviews with former citizens of the city of Düsseldorf that had been collected by the Holocaust Memorial Museum of that city. It comprises a total of 173,585 words, and is augmented by a control group of 10 speakers (13,273 words) living in a monolingual German environment collected from a body of interviews published by the *Institut für Deutsche Sprache* (Pfeffer, 1984). In order to assess the degree of ‘attrition’ that the German Jews, who had lived in an anglophone environment for about 60 years at the time that the interviews were made, had suffered, I analysed both corpora for errors on the following seven morphosyntactic variables:

- Case (CAS)
- Gender (GEN)

- Plural allomorphs and agreement (PLU)
- Verb phrase morphology (VP)
- Verb-second placement in main clauses (VS)
- Sentence-final position of nonfinite verb components in main clauses (DWO)
- Sentence-final position of the finite verb in subordinate clauses (SUB)

In addition to that, I attempted to gauge the overall morphosyntactic complexity of the interviews, by collecting the following information for a random stretch of exactly 1,000 words from the middle of each interview:

- type-token frequency of content words (TTF)
- mean frequency of those content words (assessed on the basis of two frequency dictionaries of German: Meier, 1967, and Ruoff, 1981) (MEANFR)
- distribution of the four grammatical cases on NPs (CASES)
- distribution of the three genders on NPs with non-animate referents (GENDER)
- distribution of singular and plural NPs (SGPL)
- distribution of synthetic vs. periphrastic tenses (TENSE)
- distribution of lexical and function words (WORD CLASS)

The corpus was furthermore analysed in its entirety for the following sentence structures:

- Main clauses with SVX word order (MC)
- Main clauses with XVS word order (XVS)
- Main clauses with discontinuous word order (DWO)
- Subordinate clauses¹ (SUB)

The explanatory variables traditionally explored in language attrition studies — age at the time of emigration, amount of contact with the L1 (based on self-reports) or native language of the partner or spouse— failed to show any systematic correlation with the findings on these dependent variables (Schmid, 2002: 175ff.).

In order to determine in what way the different degrees of persecution the informants had suffered might have influenced language attrition, the sample was then divided into three groups on the basis of the historical outline presented above (see Table 1).

¹ For a full description of these corpora and the means used to analyse them, see Schmid (2002), Schmid (in press).

Table 1. Groups for analysis.

Group	Emigration period	n	mean age at emigration	number of German words
EMIGRA1	Jan. 1933 – Aug. 1935	7	16.3	50,152
EMIGRA2	Sept. 1935 – Oct. 1938	14	17.3	62,567
EMIGRA3	after Nov. 1938	14	18.9	60,866
total		35	17.7	173,585

It was hypothesized that the various phases that the informants in the three groups had lived through might influence their attitudes towards their L1 to the degree that they would also impact on language maintenance and attrition. More evidence of attrition was therefore expected among the groups that emigrated at a later date, even though self-reports on the amount of use of the L1 with parents, partners and children showed no significant difference between the three emigration groups (Schmid, 2002: 171).

6. Results and discussion

By means of t-tests, the findings from the morpho-syntactic analysis of the interviews outlined above were then compared for each of these emigration groups with the findings from the control group. Where the errors in the data were concerned, the picture yielded by this comparison seems quite straightforward (see Table 2).

Table 2. Errors –t-test comparison with control group, one-tailed.

		EMIGRA1	EMIGRA2	EMIGRA3
Morphology	CAS	n.s.	n.s.	< .05
	GEN	< .05	< .01	< .05
	PLU	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
	VP	n.s.	n.s.	< .05
Syntax	VS	n.s.	n.s.	< .05
	DWO	n.s.	n.s.	< .05
	SUB	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.

It is evident that only EMIGRA3, the group which left Germany after the pogrom of November 1938, makes systematically more errors in the domains of morphosyntax than the non-attributed control group —with the exception of the feature of grammatical gender, with which all three groups seem to be having some problems. On the basis of these findings, the speakers in this group would therefore have to be classified as attriters, whereas the other two groups appear to be

‘maintainers’. However, this picture changes subtly when the findings on overall morphosyntactic complexity are taken into account (see Table 3).

Table 3. Overall complexity –t-test comparison with control group, one-tailed.

Variable	EMIGRA1	EMIGRA2	EMIGRA3
Lexicon			
TTF	< .05	< .01	< .01
FREQ	n.s.	< .05	< .05
Morphology			
CAS	n.s.	< .01	< .01
GEN	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
SGPL	< .05	< .05	< .01
TENSE	n.s.	< .01	< .01
WORD CLASS	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
Syntax			
MC	n.s.	< .01	< .01
VS	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
DWO	n.s.	< .01	< .01
SUB	n.s.	< .05	< .05

The pattern that we can perceive here is very interesting: when we look at errors from the data, it seems that only EMIGRA3 consistently has more errors than the monolingual speakers. EMIGRA3 appears thus as a group of speakers who no longer ‘sound’ like native speakers: they use more non-standard structures than native speakers do, and many of them speak German with an English accent (Schmid, 2002: 188). In addition, their overall repertoire seems to be reduced. The intermediate emigrants in the group EMIGRA2, on the other hand, are able to ‘conceal’ their attrition perfectly well, although their linguistic system clearly has lost some of its complexity and intricacy: they do not make more mistakes than unattrited speakers. The earliest group of emigrants seem to have preserved their first language to an astonishing degree more than sixty years after their emigration—they use a slightly smaller lexicon than monolingual speakers, but are in every other aspect perfectly native-like.

These findings are very interesting, since they suggest that the degree of maintenance or attrition of an emigrant’s L1 may be mediated—among other factors—by attitude and will. Those speakers who emigrated after the 1935 Nuremberg laws apparently felt a reluctance to use German that resulted in the language system ‘atrophying’ to some degree. However, it is only those who experienced the 1938 pogrom for whom this distaste became so great that they acquired features which seem to mark them as ‘non-native speakers’.

It thus appears possible that for some speakers, native competence in the German language was among the possessions they chose to leave behind, at least to

some degree. The language of the childhood home and family may have been tainted by the Nazi atrocities to the degree that they wanted no part of it any longer.

It seems tempting to ascribe this pattern of L1 attrition to a situation where the persecuted minority had the same L1 as the dominant majority, and the L1 thus became associated with elements of identity of that dominant group. It has been pointed out before that in such situations, a symbolic link between the language and the persecuting regime can lead to a rejection of that language. Since the case where persecutor and persecuted share the same L1 is in itself a rather uncommon situation, and in the present situation the outcome of a process of ethnolinguistic assimilation in the 18th and 19th century, when Yiddish ceased to be spoken among German Jews (Schmid, 2002: 48f.) it might be assumed that the effect evident in this study cannot be taken to imply that similar attitudes might apply in other cases.

However, it appears that another ethnolinguistic group with a different first language, namely speakers of Romani, also chose to abandon their L1 as a consequence of the events they suffered through under the Nazi regime: those few speakers of that language who survived the genocide in many cases later went down the path of complete assimilation, rejecting most aspects of ethnolinguistic identity including the Romani language (Dieter Halwachs, p.c.).

In this context, it is important to realize that Romani had been used within the framework of research on ‘Racial Hygiene’ during the Nazi regime to achieve a twofold purpose: to enable researchers to gain the confidence of the Romani-speaking community and, at the same time, to use the proficiency of Romani speakers as a means of classifying them ‘racially’. Robert Ritter, the director of the research center for racial and populational hygiene (*Rassen und Bevölkerungsbiologische Forschungsstelle*)—whose stated aim was to perfect knowledge of ‘races’ to the degree where he would be able “to recognize a gypsy, even though he himself is unaware of his origins” (Ritter, 1939: 5, my translation)—made sure that all those working in his center had some knowledge of Romani. This has been most thoroughly discussed in the case of his closest assistant, Eva Justin, who apparently was close to native-like in Romani (Gilsenbach, 1988: 102), and contributed substantially towards the work of the research centre which, according to Ritter, was supposed to provide an exhaustive account of the ‘gypsy’-population in Germany, in order to lead the way towards a “final solution of the gypsy question” (Ritter, 1940/1941: 480, my translation).

The language which, traditionally, had been regarded as an in-group marker had thus successfully been subverted by the persecutors in order to provide a classification on which the ‘selection process’ for deportations and genocide was based. The recognition that the language had been instrumentalized to aid the physical destruction of the speech community will have contributed towards the subsequent rejection of that language. It seems, therefore, that the roots for the rejection of the L1 by a persecuted and traumatized minority can have many different forms.

7. Conclusion

The present study has attempted to provide evidence for a process of L1 attrition that is to a large degree determined by personal attitudes and experiences. On the basis of a group of L1 speakers of German who have lived in an anglophone context over more than 60 years, and for whom the circumstances of their emigration have been well-documented historically, it was shown that experiences of persecution and thus, presumably, processes of identification and dissociation, provide a good prediction of the attritional process.

It is to be hoped that future longitudinal studies, applying sociolinguistic and sociopsychological research methods from the moment of emigration onwards, will be able to substantiate this knowledge within a more individually based framework.

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