

Testing conditions for grammatical L1 attrition: the use of clitics in Italian and Romanian

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Existing theoretical models on bilingual development focus mainly on how second languages (L2) change over time, but rarely account for the impact of L2s on maintenance of the native language (Schmid and Kopke, 2017, p.4). This project integrates two different language acquisition contexts which are typically studied independently, namely adult L2 acquisition and first language (L1) attrition. The goal is to gain insight into the circumstances under which the structure of a mature L1 grammar and an end-state L2 grammar can be affected. Sorace (2016) argues that grammatical properties at the interface with non-linguistic external conditions, like discourse information, are particularly sensitive to attrition, the same properties causing persistent difficulties for L2 speakers, and suggests that attrition may not involve a permanent loss in the grammar (no feature reorganization) but rather affects how the grammar is accessed (The Interface Hypothesis (IH), Sorace, 2011, 2016). However, Hicks and Dominguez's propose the Attrition via Acquisition (AvA) model, which suggests that structural changes may happen when the L1 and the L2 allow a certain syntactic construction but use them in different situations. Hence, prolonged exposure to the L2 can alter L1 feature-form mappings (following Lardiere, 2009), but only if the L1 allows the same syntactic construction. Additionally, L1 options are not lost but options from the L2 grammar supplement the existing grammar (Hicks and Dominguez, 2019, p.156), as also proposed in Smeets (2023) for L2 end-state grammars.

The use of Clitic Left Dislocation (CLLD) in Romanian and Italian forms an ideal case to test the AvA and the IH, as the construction is used in both languages, but they differ in the discourse contexts allowing CLLD. We examined the L2 acquisition and L1 attrition of constraints on CLLD, testing English and Romanian near-native speakers of Italian, English and Italian near-native speakers of Romanian, and Romanian near-native speakers of English. We compare two types of object left dislocation: contrastive topics and contrastive foci. Although English allows object left dislocation, it does not use clitics. In Italian, the insertion of a clitic after dislocating a direct object is restricted to contrastive topics and is disallowed when fronting a contrastive focus. In Romanian, both topics and foci require a clitic in this construction, but only when the left dislocated object is specific. The specificity distinction is irrelevant for Italian (see table 1). Since the acceptability of CLLD requires integration with the discourse context, the IH predicts attrition in the form of optionality for Romanian native speakers whose dominant language is either English or Italian. The AvA predicts attrition for Romanian-Italian bilinguals only. Specifically, they are predicted to allow clitics with fronted non-specific topics in Romanian (condition 2).

Results from an acceptability judgment and a written elicitation task show that while English near-native speakers of Italian and Romanian perform target-like in their L2, Romanian learners of Italian and Italian learners of Romanian show persistent L1 transfer effects. Romanian learners of Italian correctly learned that clitics are used with non-specific topics but did not unlearn the use of clitics with specific foci. Similarly, Italian learners of Romanian correctly learned that clitics are used with specific foci but did not unlearn the use clitics with non-specific topics, suggesting persistent L1 transfer, adding L1 options to the L2 grammar. Preliminary data from Romanian L2 speakers of English tested in their L1 does not support the IH, as no signs of attrition were found. Romanians with Italian as L2 showed a higher degree of variability, partially supporting the AvA. In a world with an increased flow of migration, the project contributes to an important recent issue concerning whether and how changes occur to native language(s).

References

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