Language Attrition and Cultural Identity Loss

Is there a connection?

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ABSTRACT

This paper will examine the research dealing with language attrition and cultural identity loss. It will work to explain how a cultural identity is formed then lost with language loss. It will also discuss why this topic is important for applied linguists to be aware of and what role we will play in language attrition and cultural identity loss.
Part 1: Language Attrition: Facts and Fiction

Language attrition: An overview

Language attrition can occur on the social level when a minority language comes into contact with a majority language and the speakers of the minority language through the generations lose their language to morph into mainstream society (Bardovi-Harlig & Stringer 2010). An example of this would be during the time of maritime exploration, when the Spanish explorers landed in Mexico and overthrew the Aztecs. Spanish at that time was the language of the wealthy and powerful, and the Aztec indigenous languages were eventually eradicated because of this. The second instance language attrition can occur is also the basis for the case study that will follow later in this paper. It can occur when an individual moves to another area where their first language is no longer the majority language. Though both of these instances are extremely important in understanding language attrition, the latter will be the main focus here.

Language attrition: A cultural study

Something that applied linguists also need to focus on is whether language attrition also means a loss of cultural identity. There is not much research to date on this particular topic, so I plan to investigate for myself what happens to a person when they experience language attrition. I plan to answer the following questions: Does a person feel less connected to their native culture when they lose their first language? What are some of the main causes in cultural identity loss and how can it be avoided?

Language attrition: Background

Although a great deal of research has been done on language attrition, applied linguists are finding that there are just as few answers now as there were before we cared about language attrition. Originally most research focused solely on what was lost rather than what was retained
(Schmid 2004). It was a true study of language *attrition* at that time. Researchers thought that by studying what was lost, they would be able to find the how’s and why’s of language attrition. After all the research, they were still no closer to answering their questions than they were when they began researching. Currently, the trend for research is to look more for what is gained rather than looking at what is lost, and the term language attrition should be revised to language retention. Now researchers believe that looking at what actually is retained when a speaker or entire language loses fluency, they will be able to better understand and theorize on why and how language attrition occurs (Schmid 2004).

Also, there are certain variables that need to be taken into consideration when looking at language attrition. The most important factor to first look at is the age of the speaker. It is a commonly known fact that children are much better at learning new languages than adults. When we are born, we are programed to distinguish and use sounds from all languages. The reason we do not continue to distinguish and use these sounds is simply because we learn to mimic what is around us (Lightbown & Spada 2006). The phrase, “use it or lose it” best describes this phenomenon. We want to fit in with society so as we grow and develop, we become more accustomed to using the language we are surrounded by and lose what we are not surrounded by. The older we become, the harder it is to retrieve those sounds and features.

Other variables we need to consider when looking at language loss is the motivation of the individual to retain their first language and the social implications that go with that speakers using the language (Bardovi-Harlig & Stringer 2004). As society changes, so do the stereotypes and negative feelings towards different cultures. Currently, as a Mexican speaker of Spanish living in America, that person may feel more pressure to allow the loss of their first language to occur, because the majority of American English speakers look at Spanish-Mexicans to be dirty
and associated with drugs and violence. Societal norms play an important role in an individual choosing to retain or lose their first language.

**Part 2: Language Attrition and Cultural Identity**

**Language attrition: Gathering data**

For this case study that is to follow, I did a one-on-one interview with Karlien Sluman. I came up with a wide variety of questions. The types of questions asked included questions about her cultural and language identity growing up compared to how she views herself now. I also asked a variety of questions on her education and how her language changed as she moved around. The final group of questions were about her personal identity now as a bilingual and how that has changed through the years. I created questions that would give Karlien the opportunity to not only look at the surface level of language acquisition and attrition, but also create her own ideas as to why she did or did not experience language attrition. I also had the chance to briefly speak with her mother so that she could fill in some of the information from when Karlien was too young to remember. Through speaking with both Karlien and her mom I have come up with my own hypothesis as to why language attrition occurs and how personal identity is affected by language loss.

**Language attrition: A case study**

Now living in the United States, Karlien Sluman, a senior at Kent State University had a much different upbringing from her peers. She is getting ready to complete her Bachelor’s Degree in Middle School Education and plans to student teach in the spring. This is also an exciting time for her as she will be returning to her home country in order to complete her student teaching requirement and is the first time she will be back for an extended stay since she first moved to the United States with her family.
Karlien was born in a small town in the Netherlands. Her father was born and raised in Holland and her mother was an American who had moved to Holland before Karlien was born. After she was born, her mother spoke to her in both English and Dutch, while her father used only Dutch. She would mostly use Dutch and would only speak some English when she communicated with her mother’s family. In most cases, however, Karlien would choose to speak Dutch even with her English only speaking family members and would rely on her mother to translate for her. “I was a very stubborn child,” says Karlien, “I refused to speak English with anyone and even when my mom spoke English, I would respond back in Dutch.”

Unfortunately for Karlien, her father worked with an international company at the time and around age six, they moved to Guam. It was from this moment on that Karlien learned to become bilingual. “I used to only speak Dutch even in Guam, but I found that in order to communicate with everyone, I would have to start using English,” explains Karlien when asked of her experiences when she first moved to Guam. For the most part she used English more than Dutch, but she still had opportunities to use Dutch at home and with her family in the Netherlands. As time when on, however, she began to lose her Dutch accent and features of the Dutch language that used to be predominant. She was not aware of it then that she was losing these features of Dutch, because it was natural for her at the time to use English in order to be understood. because she was surrounded by it almost everywhere she went. As time progressed, English slowly became her predominant language and she was slowly losing features of the Dutch language.

In 1997, the family moved to China after living in Guam for three years. At this point Karlien had completed first grade and was completely fluent in English. She was on track developmentally in English and her Dutch had at this point become a foreign language for her.
She no longer spoke much Dutch and she was thinking in English rather than Dutch. While at school in China, she began taking Chinese and took three years of it. She was seven years old, and she took Chinese for three years, but she only knew the minimum you needed to know to get by in a country. She attended an international school while in China so was still predominantly using English.

When she was 10 years old, her family moved for the last time to the United States. She has lived in the United States ever since and is now completely fluent in English. She has completely lost her Dutch accent and only remembers very few words in Chinese. She visits her relatives yearly in the Netherlands, but now in the Netherlands almost everyone speaks at least some amount of English, so when she communicates with her relatives, she uses a mix of English and Dutch. She can understand most of their conversations and respond in simple forms of Dutch, but can only speak on the surface level in Dutch. I asked Karlien whether she considers English her first or second language, and she told me she considers it her second language regardless of this loss. She said it is because even though she grew up listening to English, she does not think she ever thought in English until she was in Guam. Also, because she used Dutch the majority of the time, she considers English her second language.

Language attrition: What this all means

Although Karlien uses Dutch more as what most would consider her foreign language, she is still first and foremost a citizen of the Netherlands. The more chances I had to speak with her the more I realized how proud she is of this feature. She is of course also a dual citizen with the United States being that her parent’s are from two different cultures. She has lost some major features of her first language, but when asked what she considers herself, she always says, “I’m a Dutch-American.” She refuses to give up her Dutch identity despite living in the United States.
for more than ten years and being a native speaker of English.

So why does Karlien still have such a strong attachment to her original cultural identity? This is because she still has very strong ties with her family in the Netherlands. She visits them yearly and now, thanks to Facebook, is in constant communication with them. Even living in the United States, she and her parents sometimes find certain circumstances where a Dutch word or phrase better fits the situation than an English word or phrase. Because of these strong personal ties to family, she has not lost her cultural identity.

Bonny Norton (1997), while reviewing articles for *TESOL Quarterly* investigated similar situations. The articles she looked at all discussed language, identity and how identities are formed. She found through all three authors that language and identity go hand in hand and social identity, especially, is affected by how people relate personally to different cultures. In Karlien’s case, her social identity is affected by her relationship with her relatives in the United States and the Netherlands. If she was not still in contact with both groups, her social identity would change and she would view herself much differently.

*Does a person feel less connected to their native culture when they lose their first language?*

After interviewing Karlien and reading over her responses repeatedly, I have concluded that it is possible to feel less connected to your native culture, but it is not always possible to completely lose your identity in that culture. In Karlien’s case, she is very proud of being born a Dutch-American. Because of her double cultural identities, she can do more than most people just raised with only one culture. The biggest thing is that she is free to travel between two different continents without any constraints on time limits or government ruling. This is something many Americans dream of having. She also has greater opportunities for careers after college, because she is able to also legally work in either country. Not everyone who can relate
to more than one culture considers themself as lucky, but despite losing a language, the person has control over their cultural identity.

_What are some of the main causes in cultural identity loss and how can it be avoided?_

First, in order to answer this question, the idea of “culture” has to be understood. What do people mean when they say “cultural identity?” Most people only think of what some call the big “C” culture items. This includes language, food, music, and traditions, anything that is on the surface and obvious to the outsider. However, culture runs much deeper than that. Culture is not always about what the outsider sees, but what the individual or group is on the inside. Culture is defined as “learned patterns of behavior and attitudes shared by a group of people” (Martin & Nakayama 2007). It is not just the obvious observable things that make up a culture, but particular beliefs of a group of people, and also similar opinions, and ideas also are a part of the larger cultural identity. In one study done by Holliday (2010), he found that despite different cultural backgrounds, all the participants had similar responses with identifying their own culture. In his study, he interviewed 28 participants under the stipulation that each participant had to already be aware of what makes up a cultural identity. One thing that came from this is the idea of not being able to fully relate to anyone culture and living in a kind of cultural limbo.

This idea of a cultural limbo is a reality for a large portion of the world’s population. Because of globalization, it is a rare case now to go to a fully mono-cultural country. The mixing and combining of so many different cultures due to location, migration, or mixed family much more common now and has caused many people to reevaluate their cultural identity. Unlike Karlien who has almost created her own cultural identity by mixing two different cultures, many people feel the opposite. They are split in half, one part of them belongs to their native culture and the other belongs somewhere else. This phenomenon would be considered
cultural hybridity.

Hybridity is defined as “an association of ideas, concepts, and themes that once reinforce and contradict each other,” (Krady 2005). My personal understanding of cultural hybridity can then be described as the mixing of different ideas and languages to create a new identity different from the natives in each individual culture. It is like mixing the best of both worlds to create a new identity different from anyone else. It is an individual’s interpretation of cultural identity and how they view themselves as apart of each culture. However, cultural hybridity creates a problem with these individuals, where would they fit in society? Because they are not fully invested in one culture or another, it becomes problematic to take-on a hybrid cultural identity.

What can we, as applied linguists, do to help? The biggest way to help is making people more culturally aware of one another. We need to work towards educating people on what it means to be multicultural, and work towards global acceptance of different cultures. Not only would this help on the individual level, but also could potentially help on the global scale with less violence, war, poverty, and hunger. By making people more aware of each other’s differences, it could help with better understanding how a cultural identity is formed and why retaining a cultural identity is so important.

In conclusion, research on language attrition has not been very successful, but maybe those researching should look instead at just language and look more towards how language loss will affect cultural identity. Although great strides have been made on finding answers to our questions of why and how language attrition occurs, there are still a great deal of questions left unanswered. It is still difficult to pin point exactly why and how language is lost, not only on a social level, but also psychologically. There are a great deal of factors that go into figuring out the answers to these questions. I have shown through my case study how a person can create
their own cultural identity despite losing their native language, however this is just one case out of millions. With this specific case study, there is a definite personal connection to language and cultural identity and it can be said that through language hybridity, it is possible for people to create their own identities based on personal relations, and cultural and societal influences.

Works Cited


