Processes of lexical attrition in multilinguals: A study of lexical problem-solving behaviour

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Multilingual development is a "nonlinear and complex dynamic process depending on a number of interacting factors” (Jessner, 2008). Throughout a multilingual speaker’s lifetime, his or her language systems constantly change and adapt to communicative needs. By recognising the dynamic nature of language development, one also needs to acknowledge it as consisting of two complementary processes: language acquisition and language attrition. Whereas the former has always been a major research focus, the latter has remained under-researched by comparison.

The present study thus explores if L4 lexical attrition can be observed in the writing performance of young multilingual adults after a period of non-use of L4. It also examines if the learners’ lexical problem-solving changes after this period.

The study includes 30 young quadrilingual (German, Italian, English and French) adults from South Tyrol, Italy. The participants performed a letter-writing task in L4 French before and after a 1-1.5 year period of non-use of L4. The study is based on the writing products and on introspective data on the writing process in the form of concurrent and retrospective protocols.

An analysis of the writing products failed to show a significant decrease in lexical diversity. However, an increase in the occurrence of lexical problems in the concurrent protocols indicates that lexical attrition did take place. Furthermore, interpersonal variation was found in the participants’ lexical problem-solving behaviour: they differed both in the kinds of strategies they applied and in their attitude towards lexical problems. On the other hand, the individual participants applied similar problem-solving strategies at both test times. This suggests that individual learners might possess a certain style for lexical problem-solving that remains fairly consistent even after prolonged non-use of L4.

References


Keywords: multilingual development, language attrition, lexical problem-solving.