

I Came Long Time Ago: Language Attrition in Long-Time Bilinguals

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Do I sound odd in my native language? For many of us living abroad the answer is probably yes, but we don't realize it until we go back home. Not to worry! It's OK! You are bilingual. Intense contact with a second dominant language (L2) by a prolonged period of time will, in most scenarios, cause some sort of attrition of your native language. By language attrition we mean the case where bilingual speakers say things monolingual speakers normally don't say or find odd. For instance, in Toronto, the city where we live, about 2% of the population is Spanish-speaking. Census data shows that 25-44 year olds are the strongest demographic group among Spanish speakers. This suggests that many of these working age Spanish speakers are recent arrivals, but many have been here for decades. Among these long time immigrants, you might hear something like *Llame para atrás* (lit: 'Call back') instead of *Repita la llamada o Vuelva a llamar* ('Repeat your call', or 'Call again') when asking someone to call back. This is a vivid example of language influence among Spanish-English bilinguals in North America. The native language (Spanish) is unconsciously "restructured", in order to welcome grammatical structures of the second language (English) as its own. In the last 15 years, researchers have examined cases of attrition by long-term immigrants in many grammatical areas. Factors such as age of immigration, length of contact and prestige of the native language plus many others have been linked directly or indirectly to language attrition.

Recent studies, including our own, have unveiled interesting similarities between how bilinguals process their second language, and how their first language is affected. The traditional argument in second language acquisition has been to say that learning after a certain age is ineffectual: after puberty adult learners are presumably not able to learn a second language as children do. The idea is that once the brain matures, the learning task is much more difficult and the learning can never be completed. Our work suggests this is not quite so, and that there is another good reason behind the learning difficulties of adult L2 learners, namely, transfer from the other language.

We have studied Cuban bilinguals living in the US and Canada for more than 15 years. These individuals came as adults to this new land. Yet many of them end up displaying similar language behavior as that of advanced L2 learners. Both long-time immigrants and L2 learners had specific patterns in the use of past tense forms in Spanish that differed significantly from that of monolingual Spanish speakers. For instance, a classroom learner of Spanish wrote in a test *Cuando joven me divertí mucho* 'When young, I enjoyed myself a lot.' A native speaker would find these sentences a bit strange because of the verb form used. In Spanish, the past tense has two forms: *Tocó el piano* and *Tocaba el piano*. The former is the perfective tense used to refer to a unique event, while the latter is the imperfective tense used to refer to past habitual situations as when I say *María tocaba el piano de niña*. In English, these two meanings are conveyed with the simple past tense (*Mary played the piano/Mary played the piano as a child*). In our study, many immigrants and L2 learners were happy to allow the perfective tense to stand in these 'when I was young...' sentences, something recent Spanish immigrants disagreed with. What these results suggest to us is that the difficulties L2 learners have should not be linked directly to brain maturation. As argued by researchers like Gisela Jia and others, the role of age in the learning of a second language is not so much about brain development but a byproduct of

other factors also related to age. Children are better learners not necessarily because their brains have not matured yet but because they adapt to the new culture better and faster than adults. Kids want to fit in and interact with their peers. In the process, they absorb new cultural elements like music, movies, TV shows, games, etc., most of them in the dominant language, therefore living, literally, in a different language community from their parents. The issue here, then, is not how old you are but how quickly you integrate into the new language community.

These adult-child differences are just a fact of life. Adult immigrants are fully aware of the importance of mastering the second language, but at the same time they are also very aware of the need for keeping their native language alive. This is our dual responsibility as immigrants and language minorities. But we cannot live without change: as the poet said: *nosotros, los de entonces, ya no somos los mismos*. 'We, from back then, are no longer the same'. Many years spent with the two languages in parallel means that sometimes one language will leak into the other.

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