

Terminology matters II

Early bilinguals show cross-linguistic influence but are not attriters

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Schmid and Köpke (2017; henceforth S&K) propose a unified theory of attrition, intended to provide explanatory coverage for both L1-to-L2 and L2-to-L1 effects. To be sure, this is an intriguing idea and to the extent it can be defended on both epistemological and empirical grounds, it is very welcome. The fact that S&K do not marginalize the bi-directionality of cross-linguistic influence (CLI) is to be commended. However, in doing so, S&K claim that “attrition effects begin as soon as L1 development sets in” (p. 641), that “online/transient and representational/permanent effects [are] developmental stages on the same continuum”, and that “every bilingual is an attriter” (p. 641). In this commentary, we focus on these three statements, whose generalizability – in our view – is hard to justify, especially in consideration of research on early developing (childhood) bilinguals (EBs) and their outcomes, i.e., adult Heritage Speakers (HSs). By EBs, we refer to both simultaneous and sequential child HSs, although our arguments could also be made independently for the two subtypes.

To be fair, it is not quite clear whether S&K use the term “bilingual” to refer to *late* bilinguals exclusively, but the following suggests that they do not: In Section 5, S&K discuss data from EBs with regard to potential Age-of-Onset (AoO) effects, pointing out that EBs are more susceptible to L2-to-L1 influence than late onset bilinguals (p. 658), that many of them share more characteristics with late L2ers than with monolinguals (p. 658), and that, for most individuals, susceptibility to L1 attrition *decreases* with a higher AoO of bilingualism (p. 658). This would mean that, conversely, the younger you are, the more likely your languages will affect each other. Therefore, a possible reading of the paper (though perhaps unintended) is that every bilingual, including EBs, is an attriter. Awaiting S&K’s clarification as to which groups qualify (or not) as bilinguals, and thus potential attriters,

we maintain notwithstanding that although CLI is an undeniable phenomenon in bilingual speech there is no empirical basis for claiming that EBs are attriters.

Acquisition outcomes of early bilinguals

To start, although it is true that adult HS competence and especially performance/production tend to deviate from monolingual baselines (e.g., Montrul, 2016), it is at least premature, if not oversimplified, to claim that many HSs share more characteristics with late L2ers than with “L1-attriters” (in S&Ks sense) and monolinguals. First, such a general statement is difficult to properly quantify. Second, there is significant context missing from S&K’s claim that seems to run in discord with the implied age factor for L1 outcome competence in adult bilinguals (i.e., HSs compared to “L1-attriters”). For example, Kupisch and Rothman (2016) review a number of studies showing adult HS competence outcomes are indistinguishable from monolinguals when the HSs are highly educated in their mother tongue (L1), including with phenomena where L2ers were shown to be different from monolinguals. Bayram et al. (2017) offer supportive results, testing Turkish HSs growing up in Germany with various levels of literacy in Turkish. Across four levels of L1 literacy exposure, their results reveal that HSs are more likely to perform monolingual-like with a higher level of literacy exposure/competence. Montrul et al. (2017) tested Spanish monolinguals, HSs and typical L2ers on grammatical gender assignment and agreement with nonce words in a pseudo-artificial Spanish grammar. None of the groups differed in their handling of gender agreement with nonce words, suggesting that when no group has specific previous knowledge that could be helpful, the learning path is indistinguishable. Taken together, these studies show that when all groups acquire their target languages under comparable conditions, specifically access to literacy or nullifying previous linguistic experience, so-called “differences” between the groups sharply decline. Thus, it is not clear that HSs are in fact more like L2ers whereas “L1-attriters” are more monolingual-like. And so, the semblance of similarity between HSs and L2ers, on the one hand, and L1-attriters and monolinguals on the other (when the languages in the pairings are the same) is likely more indicative of dominance than anything else.

Not all instances of CLI are the same and CLI is not random

Our second point relates to typologies of CLI. Research on EBs showed a long time ago that developing EBs do not pass through a stage of language “(con)fusion”.

Indeed, there have been studies on EBs whose two languages could have influenced each other *but did not* (e.g., Paradis & Genesee, 1996). In other studies, the existence of CLI could not be denied, but instead of concluding that CLI supports the (old) idea of a unitary, fused system, scholars have tried to define the exact conditions under which CLI obtains (see, e.g., Kehoe, 2015; Serratrice, 2013). Subsequent work has shown that CLI does not occur randomly but under well-defined, predictable conditions, including at interfaces, with partial structural overlap, computational complexity and markedness. Crucially, CLI does not result from direct L2 or dominant language influence alone (e.g., Pérez-Leroux et al., 2009). Moreover, not all manifestations of CLI are the same. CLI can be *quantitative* or *qualitative*. Quantitative effects result in bilinguals developing faster (e.g., Kupisch, 2007) or more slowly (e.g., Müller & Hulk, 2001) compared to monolinguals, but – provided sufficient input – passing through the *same stages* in the *same order*, making the *same type* of developmental errors. Qualitative CLI also obtains, but it is less frequent; see, e.g., Schlyter (1993) for V3 structures in Swedish, Hulk (2000) for placement of object clitics in French, Kehoe, Rakow and Lleó (2004) for long lag VOT in Spanish. In short, given these findings from EB development, it does not seem reasonable to collapse together the various manifestations of CLI (and relate them all to “attrition”). Instead, it would be more interesting, for instance, to investigate whether phenomena that are subject to quantitative CLI during EB development are less vulnerable during adulthood than those for which qualitative CLI has been demonstrated.

CLI is typical of early bilinguals but not every early bilingual is an attriter

S&K do not deny the possibility of bidirectional CLI, but they do equate CLI with attrition, which becomes problematic once findings on EBs are further taken into account (see also Flores, 2017). Many EBs show bidirectional CLI during childhood and should thus, following S&K, be attriters in both languages. However, there are numerous EBs whose mature grammars do not seem to differ from those of (so-called) monolinguals. Admittedly, in the absence of longitudinal studies we do not know definitively whether the same children that show CLI during childhood will end up with deviant mature grammars. Nevertheless, we can discuss what is plausible based on available evidence, specifically including data from majority language development. In a series of studies, Kupisch and colleagues have investigated adult EBs with respect to properties that typically undergo CLI during development. These studies took into account both of the bilinguals’ languages and compared majority and minority language in different countries, keeping the language combinations constant. The speakers in these studies almost always

behaved monolingual-like in their majority language, some even in their minority language, including with phenomena such as adjective placement, gender marking, global accent, VOT and gemination (e.g., Kupisch & Rothman, 2016). Surely, we cannot exclude that, coincidentally, all the speakers in these studies had been resistant to CLI when they were children. However, given what we know about EB development, this is highly unlikely. Some bilinguals were even more conservative than monolinguals, overstressing contrasts between their two language and overcorrecting to match the requirements of the standard language (e.g., Barton, 2015). Such behavior is arguably related to the speakers' bilingual exposure, but labelling these speakers as "attriters" would seem extremely counterintuitive. In short, given that some EBs wind up with monolingual-like mature grammars in adulthood, including for properties that are known to be vulnerable to CLI during development, it seems hard to justify that every bilingual is an attriter.

Concluding remarks

Differences between monolinguals and bilinguals should be the default expectation for a plethora of reasons, but not all differences are the same. We would like to reconfirm our position and its consequences: even though most bilinguals will demonstrate at least some differences from monolinguals, not all such differences should be captured under the term of attrition and certainly not all bilinguals are attriters. Despite wonderful insights S&K's article brings to the fore, we fear that suggesting all bilinguals are attriters and that effectively all differences between bilinguals and monolinguals reflect attrition (at some level) inadvertently runs the risk of rendering the notion of attrition functionally useless. Bona fide attrition – a demonstrable change in state of grammatical competence/representation over time – is a real phenomenon that is poorly understood to date. Equating (essentially) all differences to a vaguely defined term does little – in our view – to move the research agenda on attrition forward. Precision of terminology is important for theory-internal and outward-facing reasons; our only goal in offering this dissenting view of S&K's perspective on what counts as attrition and who counts as an attriter is to enter into a dialogue about the implications this has, potentially beyond what the authors intended.

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