At the crossroads of psycholinguistics and sociolinguistics: Issues in researching first language attrition

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This paper examines psycholinguistic and sociolinguistic variables that may influence first language (L1) attrition—i.e. individual loss in L1 skills—in a second language (L2) environment and related methodological issues. It is generally agreed that attrition amongst first-generation immigrants leads to language shift in their next generations, since their already “attenuated” version of L1 is transmitted to their children and grandchildren, whose attitudinal and/or functional orientations of L1 use are different from themselves (Yagmur, 2004). In this respect, investigation into L1 attrition plays an important part in illuminating the particular contact situation where a particular immigrant community is placed as well as the overall phenomenon of language shift. Therefore, L1 attrition research should be designed to best reflect the contact situation with carefully selected variables (e.g., age, time, etc.) that may reveal how their interaction could influence an individual’s L1 skills. This paper presents some initial insights into how research can be designed to explore the effects of L1 attrition (e.g., reduced proficiency, simplified L1 structure, etc.). Some examples are drawn from a study on Korean-English late bilinguals in the immigration context in New Zealand.

REFERENCE