THE ROLE OF OPTIONALITY AND AMBIGUITY IN L1 ATTRITION: THE USE OF NULL SUBJECTS/OBJECTS IN KOREAN AMONG KOREAN-ENGLISH LATE BILINGUALS

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This paper examines the use of null subjects/objects in Korean discourse produced by two young adult Korean-English late bilinguals, whose first language appears to be affected by attrition. These participants were selected from a larger pool of 30 young Korean immigrants to New Zealand who had been exposed to an English-speaking environment since their adolescence. Ten 12-year Korean-speaking monolingual children served as a comparison group. Data were collected through a story-retelling task. The two selected participants were compared with each other and with others in the late-bilingual and monolingual groups in terms of the use of null subjects/objects in reference tracking—one of the salient features of Korean discourse. As a discourse-oriented null-subject language, Korean allows the ellipsis of any constituent of a sentence as long as the information is retrievable from the context and ambiguity does not arise. In Korean discourse, ellipsis (i.e., zero anaphor) or repeating the full NP is a more natural expression of an already-introduced human (-like) referent than using a single demonstrative as an anaphor (cf. Kim, 1992; Sohn, 1999). Analysis of data reveals that the occurrence of null pronouns in the data from the two selected participants diverges from the pattern found in data from both monolingual children and other late-bilingual participants. Data shows that this divergence is due either to the possible influence of English and/or to preference for economy of expression (cf. Polinsky, 1996). Findings highlight increased optionality in null pronoun use in the data from the selected participants and the possible changes in their perception of ambiguity in reference tracking.

REFERENCES