

## Compensatory strategies in child first language attrition within an Atlantic Creole

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**Abstract.** This study investigates compensatory strategies in lexical attrition that are applicable to Creole contact. There is evidence of lexical borrowing from a second language (L2), which is paired with discourse strategies such as exemplification and paraphrasing. Word coinage, metonymy, conversion and semantic contiguity are also all strategies implemented in an aim to compensate for lexical retrieval difficulties brought on by language attrition. It is found that an L2 User whose first language (L1) has become susceptible to language change may not employ a single strategy in an act of discourse, but may rather incorporate varying strategies, some of which serve the purpose of complementing other types of strategies in enabling successful communication. In the implementation of these strategies, though there may be influence from an L2, this L2 may not be dominant in the L2 users' repertoire and L2 features borrowed into the L1 may be imperfectly acquired.

**Keywords.** first language attrition; lexical attrition; Creole contact; compensatory strategies; Papiamentu; Jamaican Creole

**1. Introduction.** First language (L1) acquisition is a naturally occurring process that renders a child a native speaker of the language(s) from which adequate input is received. The child, who is biologically engineered to develop mastery of a native tongue within a critical period for language acquisition, attains the tacit knowledge that constitutes native speaker competence. Language users, as social beings, may develop a sense of pride and of belonging, especially if their native tongue is classified as an indigenous language or if it marks the language user as belonging to a unique, nativized speech community. Language is then tied to culture and norms and forms a part of our identity.

First language users then face a conundrum when they find themselves in a situation, where, as immigrants in a foreign country, they need to adapt to a new way of life and develop proficiency in an unfamiliar language that is dominantly spoken as an L1 within their new environment. The plot thickens as the immigrant, who often settles in another country for economic or social advancement, finds that fellow speakers of their first language are but a few, if at all present. Furthermore, as the immigrants seek gainful employment, they come to realise that competence in the now dominant language is a requirement for employment. Child immigrants who are enrolled in educational institutions find that they receive instruction in the first language of the new speech community and that playtime usually involves its use. The demand of belonging, of being accepted by a particular social group, of career advancement or of simply comfortably existing in the new environment become strong motivating factors for the immigrant to develop competence in a second language (L2), thus becoming an L2 user.

The thought of 'use it or lose it' (Pinker 1994) has become embedded in literature on L1 attrition, whereby L2 users experience changes in their native language due to a lack of use or reduced use and input from the L1. These changes represent a divergence from the linguistic norms of the native speech community and may extend to the native speaker experiencing complete loss of competence in the mother tongue. This evolutionary process adequately represents the

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assertion made by Triolet, the Russian- French bilingual writer, who states, “You cannot keep [a language] safe within you, it must get some exercise. You must use it, or else it gets rusty, it atrophies and dies.” (Beaujour 1984).

This paper focuses on inter- and intra-lingual effects of lexical attrition based on the experience of a 13-year-old child immigrant to Curaçao, who has faced difficulties in retrieving lexical items in Jamaican Creole, her native language. This instance of lexical attrition occurs in a situation where multiple languages form a part of the interlanguages produced by the child immigrant. Focus is placed on the nature of the loss as far as the input of the intervening languages go as well as on the lexical strategies the child immigrant incorporates to compensate for such a loss.

Of course, the experience of a single L2 user is not meant to represent the experience all immigrants will have; it however provides insight into the processes that may be present in such a situation, especially in the cases where two Creole languages are in contact. The informant whose utterances are analysed in this chapter represents one of 21 informants who took part in a larger study on the attrition of Jamaican Creole in contact with Papiamentu, but for whom, changes in the lexicon were not as profound as those in the syntax, which formed the primary focus of the original study.

**2. Background.** In Messam-Johnson (2017), I adopt the view that attrition is a gradual process in which there is a change in language proficiency or competence (usually classified as ‘loss’). This results from reduced contact with the L1 and the use thereof as well as from the influence of an L2. Implicit in this adaptation is the notion that L1 attrition may exhibit internally-induced and externally-induced changes. Internally-induced changes are brought on by some characteristic of the L1, and externally-induced changes are a result of influence from an L2 (cf. Seliger and Vago 1991). Internally-induced changes, according to Seliger and Vago, may be recognized as simplification, regularization, naturalness, intralinguistic effects or conceptual/cognitive/innate strategies. Externally-induced changes, on the other hand, result from transfer, interference, convergence, interlingual effects or cross-linguistic influences. In the case of crosslinguistic influence, the L1 is ‘patterned on analogy to the L2’. There is evidence that some individuals are able to maintain user control of the L1 even after years of disuse, but for all users, there has been evidence of a weakened L1 (MacWhinney 2019). The severity of attrition effects varies and has been linked to the age of onset of L2 learning (Messam 2021) as well as length of residence in the L2 country, among other factors (Olshtain & Barzilay 1991; Porte 2003:104; Messam-Johnson 2017).

Lexical retrieval difficulties as well as the complete erasure of words from the memory of the L2 user have been attributed to lexical attrition (cf. Isurin 2013; Pallier 2003b). The complete loss of a vocabulary item from the memory of the L2 user is considered the ultimate case whilst minor cases exhibit as word-retrieval difficulties. In these scenarios, the attriter may successfully retrieve the problematic word from memory with great effort and a ‘relatively time-consuming mental search’ (Jarvis 2019).

The multi-competence approach to language use has been proposed to account for L2 effects on the L1, wherein multi-competence is defined as ‘the overall system of a mind or a community that uses more than one language’ (Cook 2016); it considers the interaction among these languages. The languages of the L2 user make up the overall language system of the individual, and each language potentially differs from that of the monolingual speaker. The integration continuum model (Cook 2003) adequately represents the complexity of inter-relationships existing among the languages within the system. These relationships range from complete separation to

complete integration, with varying levels of interconnection in-between. At the separation end of the continuum, the languages of the L2 user maintain autonomy in the L2 user's mind. This stands in contrast to total integration, where the languages merge to form a unitary system. Cook (2003, 2016) acknowledges that the two extremes are non-existent ideals, the reality being that all L2 users may be placed at some point of interconnection along the continuum, with the possibility of being displaced to other areas of interconnectivity as 'influence of a particular language waxes and wanes' through attrition and transfer.

**3. Subject.** Sherida,<sup>1</sup> a 13-year-old girl on the verge of becoming 14 years old within a month, resides in the Dutch Caribbean island, Curaçao, with her mom, who works as a housekeeper and a hairdresser. She is a Jamaican national who migrated within the critical period for language acquisition at 8 years old. She attends school in Curaçao, where Dutch and Papiamentu are languages of instruction and she proudly considers herself a multilingual speaker of these languages in addition to Spanish, English and Jamaican Creole, which she refers to as 'Kiyiol' rather than 'Patwa', as this vernacular is commonly termed in her home country.

The dominant language spoken by Sherida is Papiamentu, which she acquired upon her arrival in Curaçao. She fluently speaks it with her friends, classmates, teachers and others with whom she comes in contact in everyday interaction; this includes fellow Jamaican children. She continues to use Jamaican Creole with her mom, who has since found great motivation to learn Papiamentu, with the opening of her hair salon. Upon first arriving to Curaçao, Sherida had to interact in English with fellow L2 users of English. As she became integrated within society, the need for proficiency in Papiamentu arose.

The larger study of which Sherida was a participant aimed at determining the possible effects of attrition on native Jamaican Creole when the target language was another Creole. As it ought to be with any study of language attrition, it was integral that at first contact, authentic data were elicited from the participants. Of five data elicitation types, naturalistic data which reflected authentic and spontaneous speech were first gathered. Informants were engaged in light, informal conversation according to their interests. These conversations also simultaneously revealed information on their sociolinguistic background. This type of data allowed for the revelation of changes to the L1 that may not have been anticipated prior to the beginning of the study and formed the bases upon which data collection tasks that followed were structured. Subsequent data techniques were clinical elicitation, experimental elicitation, metalinguistic judgements and self-report. Deviances that were not anticipated prior to the commencement of the study but which were identified in the natural use data and each preceding data collection task were targeted in elicitation types that followed. This method allowed for the repetition of errors and eliminated performance-based errors being considered evidence of attrition.

Though Syntactic data were initially targeted, changes in the lexicon were evident and it became clear that strategies were being implemented to compensate for difficulties encountered when using the first language.

**4. The strategies.** Strategies L2 Users implement to navigate language loss and declining proficiency in language use have long been documented in the literature on L1 attrition. Bialystock (1983) classifies these strategies as being L1-based or L2-based. L1-based strategies occur independently of the L2 and may be realised as word coinage, semantic contiguity and circumlocution. L2-based strategies, on the other hand, reveal an intermingling of the languages in contact. This is realised through language switching, foreignizing and transliteration. L2 forms are

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<sup>1</sup> Changed to protect identity.

transferred into the L1, or an L2 rule is imposed upon the L1 as the L2 learner attempts to solve linguistic challenges to clear communication.

Turian and Altenberg (1991) similarly note the prevalence of L1 and L2-based strategies exhibited by L2 learners. These they refer to as intra- and interlingual strategies, respectively. Intra-lingual strategies are independent of the L2 and may include analogical leveling, lexical innovation and approximation (cf. Andersen 1982; Poullisse et al 1984), whilst interlingual strategies incorporate both languages through code-switching, lexical borrowing and syntactic transfer.

Turian and Altenberg (1991) extend the classification of strategies employed by the L2 user in consideration of nuances of the interaction in which the L2 user is engaged. Beyond the scope of the roles played by the languages in contact are then discourse strategies. The focus here lies not on the production of acceptable L1 structures, but rather on acts of the L2 user as L1 utterances are produced. Whether L2 users make comments, appeal for assistance, deliberately provide wrong answers or avoid linguistic structures they might not be comfortable producing are considered.

4.1. LEXICAL BORROWING. Our subject provides us with the realization that lexical items may be adapted into the L1 through full transfer. Unlike other informants included in the study, full transfer was evident only in Sherida's use of *abogado*, the Spanish equivalent of 'lawyer'. This may be a case of forgetting as Sherida showed noticeable attempts to recall the Jamaican equivalent of the profession to which she aspired. Her case illustrates that the L2 user may be explicitly aware of possible divergences from the L1 in their speech. A case for complete attrition rather than a loss of variation in stylistic options may also be made here. Not only was *abogado* invariably used for Jamaican *laiya*, but also its use may be said to be incongruent with conditions of code-switching, whereby within the context of its use, the interlocuters did not share knowledge of both languages. Sherida demonstrated awareness of this in her attempts to ensure that the idea she was attempting to express was understood by the interviewer. This was done by way of her explicitly enquiring whether the interviewer was familiar with the divergent term. Upon realizing that the term was indeed an unfamiliar one, rather than providing an adequate substitute to break down the communication barrier, Sherida instead sought to provide an explanation of the term (1) as well as a lengthy scenario as an example:

- (1) Laik wen yu in koot (kuot) tu difen somwan.  
Like when 2s in court to defend someone  
'Like when you are in court to defend someone.'

Lexical borrowing, in the instance of *abogado* for our informant, was paired with exemplification and paraphrasing. One would have anticipated that, with Papiamentu being the dominant L2 of immigrants to Curaçao, the L2 providing lexical input would have been Papiamentu. It would have been less surprising had the English equivalent been used since English is the official language of the L1 country as well as the lexifier of the L1. However, it cannot be claimed that English is the 1<sup>st</sup> language of the mass, and for those who possess advanced competence in the language, it is often the weaker language in comparison to the mass vernacular, Jamaican Creole.

4.2. WORD COINAGE. There are instances in which the attempt at full transfer from an L2 may not be successful. Such circumstances may result in the creation of novel items. The use of *tijamara* in the context of a *tijamara* party exemplifies this. Sherida explained that the term she provided was a Spanish reference; however, no such term was found to exist. It is however clear that Sherida had forgotten the equivalent L1 reference as context reveals that she referred to a *pijaama paati* 'pyjama party'. This item was neither retrievable in English nor in Jamaican Creole since

*pyjama* is a cognate, a lexical item both languages share. Similar to the case of *abogado*, Sherida in this scenario, relies on Spanish vocabulary to fill gaps reduced proficiency in the L1 has created. This is applicable even in instances where aspects of the language being transferred into the L1 have been imperfectly acquired. This may be a result of Sherida's love for the language. She indicates that she learnt Spanish through watching tv and claims that she would not normally have used the language in school. It was therefore a surprise to everyone when she abruptly began to communicate in Spanish.

Andersen (1982) accounts for lexical innovation. Sherida showed further novelty in the lexicon through creations that were not linked to an L2. This included *kasolin* for 'hair salon', the Jamaican equivalent being *ier salan*, or *ierjresa shap* (lit. hairdresser shop) and *multimijanal*, which in Jamaican would have been expressed as *milianier* or through concepts such as *bilianier* 'billionaire' or the reduplicated attributive form *rich rich* 'very rich'.

4.3. METONYMY. The case of *ierjresa* portrays another compensatory strategy in the case of lexical loss as used in the following context:

- (2) Shi a go uopn wahn ierjresa bai ahn bai wi yaad...  
 3S PROG go open INDF hairdresser by ah by POSS yaad  
 '#She is going to open a hairdresser at our home...'

The person who carries out the act of grooming one's hair is used to represent the building one may visit to receive such a service. Of note, the construction including metonymy was intended to complement the instance of lexical innovation *kasolin* provided. Sherida aimed to recover from a potential breakdown in communication that may have occurred by implementing another compensatory strategy. This represents an L1-based or intralinguistic strategy as no evidence of L2 influence is found.

4.4. CONVERSION. Lexical attrition may present itself through evidence of conversion, where an item marked as belonging to one word class in the L1 functions as another. *Soluushan*, which is categorically nominal is found to act verbally as the subject targets *salv* 'solve':

- (3) Mi aalwiez soluushan dehn problem.  
 1SG always solution POSS problem  
 '\* I always solution their problems.'

The nature of this construction, though found to be infrequent, implies that lexical loss may take the form of a single member of a paradigm becoming susceptible to loss. Where this occurs, the L2 user may substitute the item in question with another member of the paradigm, regardless of lexical category. Success in communicating the intended idea is prioritised. Conversion has proved to be L1-based since the change is independent of an L2.

4.5. SEMANTIC CONTIGUITY. Similar to conversion, semantic contiguity is an intra-lingual strategy that involves members of a single paradigm. Here, one member of a paradigm stands in substitution for another of the same lexical category; however, both forms are morphologically unrelated though semantically linked. The use of the single form *wach* to convey the concepts *look for*, *look at*, and *look through* (4)–(6) exemplifies this. The production of the three utterances may also be construed as simplification of the grammar through a loss of stylistic variation. A single form replaces multiple forms which bear a shade of similarity in meaning but which are nonetheless distinctive:

- (4) Shulandi dii a **wach** wahn flouwaz wid iihn faada fi i mada.  
 Shulandi PST PROG watch INDF flower-PLU with POSS father for DEF mother  
 ‘#Shulandi was watching a flower with her father for her mother.’ [Pp buska]
- (5) Shulandi tan op a **wach** wahn vaaz we shi did laik.  
 Shulandi stand up PROG watch INDF vase that 3SG PST like  
 ‘#Shulandi is watching a vase that she had liked.’ [Pp mira]
- (6) Shulandi a **wach** sohn buk.  
 Shulandi PROG watch INDF book  
 ‘#Shulandi is watching some books.’ [Pp wak la]

The idea of *looking* is similar among the utterances, but the accompanying prepositions render them with distinguishable attributes based on context. Interestingly, *wach* is not appropriately used in either of the contexts in which it appears. In Jamaican Creole, *wach* is restricted to observation that prolongs over a period of time. It construes attentiveness:

- (7) Sammy a **wach** TV.  
 Sammy PROG watch TV  
 ‘Sammy is watching TV.’

It may also be used synonymously with *baby-sit* or *monitor*:

- (8) Uu a **wach** di biebi?  
 Who PROG watch DEF baby  
 ‘Who is monitoring the baby?’

In (4), however, the subject is *looking for* or *searching for* a pot of flowers that is a suitable gift for her mother. In (5), unlike (7), the subject is observing the vase but is not observing an action involving the vase that is taking place over time, neither is that vase being monitored. This renders *wach*, within the context of (5), an inappropriate use. Illustration (6), which follows, conveys the act of *browsing* or *looking through*, another context that is semantically unacceptable for the use of *wach* in Jamaican Creole. Common to all three contexts is the fact that syntactically *luk* ‘look’ may occur with a preposition, an environment in which *wach* is unable to occur. *Wach* occurs without a prepositional particle.

**5. Closing remarks.** The case of Sherida shows that in child L1 attrition, the lexicon may exhibit effects of loss and change. These changes may be a result of reduced input from the L1 and a reduction in its use. Declining proficiency, however, threatens successful communication and may prompt the L2 user to employ strategies to compensate for lexical retrieval difficulties. These strategies are categorically intralingual strategies, interlingual strategies and discourse strategies. Intralingual strategies are dominant and include word coinage, metonymy, conversion and semantic contiguity, whilst interlingual strategies are primarily restricted to lexical borrowing but may be apparent in instances of word coinage, where novelty may be L2 influenced. The L2 that is called upon may not necessarily be the dominant L2 of the speech community nor the primary L2 of the attriter. Following from this, it is also clear that an L2 feature may be imperfectly acquired but nonetheless capable of facilitating transfer to the L1.

The L1 attriter may be aware of the challenges being faced with the L1 and may pointedly call on these strategies to ensure shared understanding with the interlocutor, thereby preventing or recovering from a possible breakdown in communication. In achieving this, strategies are not used in isolation of each other when lexical retrieval challenges arise; discourse strategies, including explanation, exemplification and overt questioning of understanding may be cohesively

employed with interlingual and intralingual strategies. Through the use of the strategies outlined, the L2 user may seek to simplify the L1, resulting in reduced variation or a loss of stylistic options, a concept accounted for by Kouwenberg (2000). The ultimate goal for the L2 user is to maintain effective communication, and through the implementation of these varying coping strategies, this goal is often achieved.

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