Second Language Research

Comments on:
A model for L1 grammatical attrition, by Glyn Hicks & Laura Domínguez

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This is a very programmatic article. It proposes an adaptation of the schema of language acquisition of Lidz and Gagliardi (2016) to the L1 + L2 situation, which is the one where so-called attrition is most visibly manifested. The approach assumed here has the merit to have made explicit the role that external factors (including statistical ones, memory-related ones …), play in acquisition without this being incompatible with a grammatical/UG constrained approach to language acquisition. The fact that the maturation of computational resources of various kinds should be taken into the picture is in fact a much-shared view, an almost unavoidable conclusion in child language acquisition. It is interesting to put into question the role of related considerations in the L2 situation leading to attrition, as is done in this target article.
There are at least two main insights in the article that I find especially inspiring and relevant:
   i. The explicit adherence to the input/intake distinction, where the latter is in fact the former analyzed by the internal grammar of the language acquirer.
   ii. The explicit aim of not having any special specific constraint or mechanism solely regarding attrition, which is just seen as a peculiar condition of language acquisition. This aim of the article is especially welcome.
Attrition occurs when external conditions are such that an L2 input introduced in (linguistic) adulthood – i.e. when the L1 grammar is in place – takes priority over the L1 input. The fact that a special name is dedicated to aspects of the speaker's L1 in these circumstances, is primarily due to the fact that the external factors play a crucial role in characterizing the conditions giving raise to attrition. Thus, attrition is manifested through a set of phenomena, involving both speakers' production and comprehension (in L1), that may arise because, on the impulse of the L2 overwhelming input (the external conditions), acquisition reopens up so to speak, affecting the L1; the authors phrase the hypothesis in terms of the adopted model of inference and acquisitional intake.
The authors do not want to go through a thorough distinction of types of bi-/multiligualism – they say this in a few places in the article – still some words on the types of child and adult multiligualism would have been welcome (e.g. Meisel's 2001 two first languages vs L2, and much related work in that tradition) as attrition characteristically concerns an adult grammar. We speakers are in fact all bi-/multilingual – cfr. mastery of different registers, access to different varieties depending on the external linguistic situation, and also more or less rich access to different languages during lifespan. So, attrition may be seen as a peculiar instance of this current situation in which external conditions favor a prompter access to what may ultimately be seen as possible L1 varieties. According to the article's proposal, attrition under contact with the L2 would amount to a re-organization of the status and distribution of morphosyntactic feature bundles in the functional lexicon, leading to a different intake, to a new and different grammatical analysis in the L1.
There aspects of the description of the proposal, which would call for some further development/discussion. At least the following two could be mentioned:
   - The comparison with the parametric approach
   - The comparison with previous proposals that, although formulated with a slightly different jargon, may be seen as in fact very close and worth taking into consideration
Starting from the latter point, there are aspects of the syntax of subjects (null vs overt, pre- vs post-verbal) in different L2 and L1 populations, including heritage speakers and attrited speakers (cfr. Caloi et al. 2018 and references cited therein) which have been phrased in terms of a grammatical approach to language acquisition, that takes into consideration the external conditions as defined above. Furthermore, in an article that appeared in the past (Belletti, Bennati & Sorace 2007) the suggestion has been put forth that the overuse of subject pronouns in the comprehension of near-native L2 speakers of Italian could be due

to the analysis of the overt pronominal subject as a weak pronoun, rather than a strong pronoun (following Cardinaletti and Starke's 1999 typology of pronouns), as it is instead the case in the most current variety of standard Italian (which is possibly undergoing language change in this domain, to some extent). This interpretation would seem very close to the reorganization of feature assemblies operating in the proposal developed here, also assumed to account for a closely related phenomenology in different varieties of Spanish discussed in the paper, and it would naturally extend to the parallel situation found in attrited speakers (Tsimpli et al 2004, discussed in this paper), as also proposed in the original 2007 article mentioned above.

Note that the discourse interface nature of the phenomenon concerning the overt/null distinction is not at odds with the grammatical explanation just suggested. This should anyway be the case, as grammar cannot be separated from its use in concrete discourse situations, where it operates through its formal constraints. Thus, the fact of favoring the grammatical analysis of the subject pronoun as a weak pronoun in the results mentioned above should in fact be the consequence of the particular discourse conditions given in the experiments. Similarly, appropriate use of post-verbal subjects has been shown to be both discourse-constrained (e.g. the word order is characteristically linked to the new information focus interpretation of the subject) as well as grammatically-constrained (the null subject nature of the language seen as a necessary condition; Belletti 2004 and subsequent related references develop this point in detail).

Still on the issue of overt vs null subject pronouns. In their critique of the interface approach, the authors mention one claim central to the standard formulation of the approach, i.e. the fact that 'syntactic properties *per se* are not vulnerable'. As an example of core syntactic principle, the authors consider Principle B of the Binding theory, where variation is, instead, apparently found:

> 'The classical 'binding principles' that determine the syntactic distribution and interpretive dependencies of different types of nominals (e.g. pronouns, anaphors) are a paradigm case of a core syntactic phenomenon, bearing the syntactic hallmarks of locality and c-command. For example, due to Principle B of the classical binding theory, overt pronominals are governed by a requirement to be disjoint in reference from any local c-commanding nominal. Yet, the patterns described by the binding principles are known to exhibit structured variation across languages: in a subordinate clause, the subject pronominal *o* in Turkish, unlike English (or Dutch), cannot be bound by the subject of the matrix clause…'

The following question arises: Do we really see the operation of Principle B here? This is not uncontroversial as it all depends on what the analysis of the assumed binding domain is. In fact, the phenomenon looks very similar to the one discussed earlier based on Tsimpli's et al. results. With the difference that in the reported examples from Turkish the embedded clause is a complement clause, whereas it was an adjunct clause in Tsimpli's design. This factor may not be irrelevant as well. There are further questions that arise in this discussion, a crucial one is: how does the overt/null alternation work in this respect in Turkish (the facts are reported in the quoted source, but not here)? Note that as Principle B does not make any distinction between overt and null pronominals, a different behavior of overt vs null pronouns, if it manifests itself, should not be interpreted as a consequence of the binding principle anyway.

Moving to the other point above concerning the comparison with the traditional parametric approach, the authors say:

> 'In acquisition, the setting of language-specific morphosyntactic properties is a matter of
> assigning grammatical representations of the input in a way that specifies lexical items with
> morphosyntactic features. These feature assemblies interact with those of other lexical items in a
> way that is consistent with a minimal core of universal syntactic properties plus general mechanisms
> of efficient computation.'

It does not seem that this is different from what a parameter is meant to be and what the interaction between principles and parameter setting ultimately amounts to. This is probably implicit in the statement: ...'setting of language-specific morphosyntactic properties' made here, where the very term 'setting' is used, appropriately I think. The real issue is, and has always been, what the precise formulation of a parameter should be. The hypothesis defended here is very much in the spirit of substantial work using the traditional term 'parameter': the precise selection and organization of functional features in compliance with general invariable principles.

> 'Returning to the language acquisition model adopted above, the target of acquisitional intake is now understood to be the assemblies of features specified on items of the functional lexicon.'

This sounds the same as the so-called Chomsky-Borer conjecture, which finds its mention in a footnote (some further accompanying literature may include e.g. Rizzi 2014, 2017 and the related contributions in the collections). It would be worthwhile to compare the new proposal with the tradition it belongs to, discussing analyses and considerations from previous work in theoretical syntax and grammatically oriented studies of (different modes of) language acquisition, stemming from the Principles & Parameters tradition and its development within the Minimalist enterprise.

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