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The effects of L1 re-immersion on Italian anaphora resolution in an L2 environment

We investigate whether adult native speakers of Italian who left Italy after puberty and lived in Sweden for at least seven years (late bilinguals) display effects of L1 attrition, and whether they show recovery effects after a re-immersion to Italian, during their summer holidays. We also tested a control group of adult native speakers of Italian living in their home country (monolinguals). The re-immersion allows us to test the hypothesis that L1 attrition is a selective process that affects interface structures and that pertains to processing and language co-activation rather than to changes in grammatical knowledge (Chamorro, Sorace & Sturt, 2015; Sorace, 2011). Following this hypothesis, we expect the group of late bilinguals to perform better after L1 re-immersion, suggesting that attrition is caused by restricted L1 input and to activation mechanisms (Paradis, 1993) rather than to permanent changes in L1 grammatical knowledge. Moreover, we expect that late bilinguals display attrition effects when asked to identify the antecedent of an overt pronoun, due to influence of L2 Swedish. We follow the “Position of Antecedent Strategy” (Carminati, 2002), which postulates that Italian null pronouns are generally assigned to the antecedent in the highest SpecIP, and overt pronouns to an antecedent in a lower syntactic position. The difference between the two groups in the antecedent assignment was significant for overt pronouns: late bilinguals assign overt pronouns to the object of the main clause less often (83%) than monolinguals (91%). After L1 re-immersion late bilinguals show an improvement in terms of expected answers, reaction and reading times while in monolinguals this change is asymmetrical. These results suggest that L1 attrition pertains to language co-activation and processing rather than to changes in grammatical knowledge.

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