THE LINGUISTIC ATTRIBUTES OF SECOND LANGUAGE ATTRITION

Abstract: This paper deals with the phenomenon of language attrition, known as the process of losing first or second language. The review of the main theoretical theses of the leading scientific researchers is given. The research provides the analysis of theories and hypotheses, explaining why some structures of language are more vulnerable to attrition. The theory of functional load, regression hypothesis and saving theory are presented.

Keywords: language attrition, language loss, theoretical consideration, regression, functional load, English language.
Language loss or attrition, known in philological, psychological, and pedagogical literature, is a relatively new area of applied linguistics. Language attrition is considered as the process of losing the system of native or second (previously studied) language, which occurs as a result of contact with another language [1, p. 28]. Despite the long-standing tradition of studying language loss (from the 1920s), the main impact on attrition research was received at the conference held at the University of Pennsylvania (USA) in 1980.

R. Lambert and B. Frid regard such types of attrition as the loss of native (mother) language (L1 interference) and the second language acquired, as a consequence of a long stay in the environment of its speakers (L2 interference) from different points of view. They also summarize some methodological recommendations [8, с. 163].

A significant event was the emergence of the theory of teaching the second language (Second Language Acquisition, SLA). S. Krashen (Stephen D. Krashen), an American linguist and researcher of the process of teaching languages, outlined his own vision of the process of teaching a non-native language in the book «Second Language Acquisition and Second Language Learning». The following five hypotheses are the constitutive elements of the theory: «acquisition and training», «natural order», «internal control», «incoming information» and «emotional filter» [7]. According to this theory the study of language depends on incoming information when subconscious acquisition prevails over the conscious.

These works have formed a certain field of research with clear theoretical foundations and assumptions and led to the final design in the year 2000 of two main areas – attrition of the first and second / foreign language. In subsequent years,
attenuation of mother tongue was mainly the subject of research related to the loss of language by national minorities, and the attrition of a foreign language began to be studied in connection with its teaching and learning processes.

In the research findings of M.S. Schmid and T.H. Mekhocheva language attrition is classified into 3 types:

1) the first generation of immigrants - the loss of L1 (first language) in the environment L2 (second language);

2) the second generation of immigrants (also called «native speakers» or «incomplete students») - the loss of the hereditary language;

3) (advanced) adults learning second (SL) or foreign language (FL); in this case knowledge gained at school or university is forfeited - L2 / FL loss in L1 environment [12].

Language attrition can be observed in a particular native speaker who is gradually forgetting the language as a result of various reasons (individual level). Also it is defined at the level of entire language groups, immigrant and traditional, which are steadily switching to a new language and reducing the usage of their native language. As a result the latter accumulates the characteristic features of linguistic decay. In addition, attrition is evidenced both in separate «pathological» cases (for example, within patients with language impairment due to a blood-stroke or brain injury), and in «non-pathological» cases – for example, in case of attrition among students learning foreign language.

Traditionally, the process of acquiring a native language is regarded as a linear process characterized by a steady upward movement. Accordingly, one would expect that people studying foreign language, if they do not have any development problems, primarily cognitive ones, will go through the similar stages of the language acquisition process. However, the dynamics and results of mastering L1 and L2 are different. The outcome of studying L1 is usually «full language proficiency», in the case of studying L2 or FL this is not so.

Studies on mastering L2 have shown that learning a foreign language is not a simple process. As noted by De Bot [2], the research in the field of cognitive and
functional linguistics revealed many factors that influence on the process of mastering the language. These factors include not only the elements within the linguistic system, but also the environment, as well as individual characteristics related to each person. It is also assumed that these factors interact at different levels: «in communication, in the construction of meaning, in learning the language and between languages in the bilingual brain», which makes it difficult to predict the final learning outcome using a simple linear function [2, p. 17].

There are several theories and hypotheses that explain the nature of language loss.

1. Regression hypothesis

The regression hypothesis (RH) is one of the most commonly used. RH, originally formulated by T. Ribot in the 1880s, was adapted by Jacobson in 1968 [5]. He applied it to the phonological losses in aphasia. The hypothesis describes the linguistic decay as a mirror reflexion of acquisition or language learning [15]. Having lost the language, a person will always follow the order, opposite to the stages of development. As a result, the last learned will be the first to forget, and the first learned will be the last to forget. The assumption underlying these predictions is closely related to how these elements are represented in the memory, for example, the fact that dependency relations are connected with early obtained knowledge. This knowledge often becomes the basis for acquiring new knowledge. RH has been used in several studies on L1 attrition, including the works of M. Tomiyama [13, p. 328].

2. Functional load theory

The term «functional load» refers to the scale of contrast between some linguistic units, usually phonemes. R. Andersen in the article «Linguistic attributes of language depletion» suggested that the frequency of elements, functional load (its significance) and the frequency of using the language play a vital role in the process of attrition, determining which parts or elements of the language will be forgotten first [1, p. 78].

Compared to the native language, the second language has fewer quantity and less distinctive phonological features, except when phonological differences exist in both languages and the differences in L2 carry high functional load. According to the
results of these studies, Anderson hypothesized that: 1) the phonological differences that exist in both L1 and L2 will be more resistant to attrition; 2) phonological differences that carry high functional load in L2 will be more resistant to loss than those that carry low functional load.

De Bot and B. Weltens claim that these linguistic features are similar to the way in which vocabulary and grammar are presented in teaching and learning FL. That is, at first you learn and master high-frequency words, which are gradually followed by less and less frequent subjects [3, from. 376]; simple grammar forms precede more complex ones. Thus, it generated another version of RH, «best learned = last forgotten».

3. Nelson’s saving paradigm

Another controversial issue in studies of problem of language attrition FL is understanding to what extent linguistic elements and structures that were once mastered can actually be «erased» from memory, and not just become inaccessible in real time.

Nelson's «Savings Paradigm» [10] is a relearning theory that traces back to the widespread view of psychologists, who consider that memory information simply becomes inaccessible due to various factors, but it can be restored as long as there are correct signals [10, p. 455]. This assumption was supported in researches using hypnosis to restore an inherited and seemingly completely lost language [10, p. 460].

In relation to forgotten language, the savings paradigm is based on the idea that once a word has been learned, there are remainders that can be used to reactivate it. Different activation levels are required for recalling (higher level) and recognizing the word (lower level). As soon as the threshold falls below the recognition level, the word is usually considered lost. However, the savings paradigm suggests, that residual knowledge will facilitate the process of relearning the word, and not acquiring a new one, previously unknown.

The practical application of research findings associated with studies of FL attrition can contribute to more effective language learning with long-term results, development of teaching methods of FL. Apart from that, there are other important
scientific benefits that can be derived from the study of attrition – a better understanding of human memory and the mechanisms that regulate language; a better understanding of extraction of language information and language processing, as well as the nature and organization of language knowledge.

It should be noted that the results of previous FL studies for the current context may be insufficient, since teaching, learning and using foreign languages change very rapidly. This implies the need to research language attrition, taking into account the features of teaching and language learning methods used at the time of education.

REFERENCES


