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Last in first out?
An investigation of the regression hypothesis in Dutch emigrants in Anglophone Canada

The central question in this dissertation is whether first language attrition is the mirror image of first language acquisition. In other words, is it true that those linguistic features that are acquired late in children are also vulnerable to attrition? This idea is captured in the regression hypothesis.

In order to test the regression hypothesis, three different groups of language users were included in the study’s design: 45 first-generation Dutch emigrants in Anglophone Canada, 45 matched control subjects in the Netherlands and a group of 35 Dutch adolescents of 13 and 14 years old. The three groups of subjects were compared on their morphological and morpho-syntactic proficiency, because these two language domains tend to show gradual and clear developmental sequences in children, which can easily be compared to attrition processes. All subjects were presented with a number of formal tasks, but spontaneous data samples were also collected.

The findings suggest that morphology and morpho-syntax are more impaired in language attrition than purely syntactic phenomena. More importantly, mirror symmetries were often revealed here between the attriters and acquirers, as opposed to the control subjects in the Netherlands, thus providing evidence for regression. Purely syntactic phenomena, such as word order in main and subordinate clauses, proved to be more problematic for the attriters than the L1 learners and many L2 English influences were attested here.

The research reported in this dissertation is of interest to researchers working in the fields of first and second language acquisition, multilingualism, language attrition, language change, but also morphology and morpho-syntax.