
From the Typewriter of A.L. A Case Study in Language Loss

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1 Introduction

It seems to be almost commonplace for overviews of language loss research to state in an introductory section that the study of language attrition is a relatively recent phenomenon. On the other hand, it also seems to be customary to mention some early studies on language attrition as a consequence of neurological impairment, such as Ribot's *Les maladies de la memoire* (1883), Freud's *On Aphasia* (1891) and Jakobson's *Kindersprache, Aphasie und allgemeine Lautgesetze* (1941). These early studies have in common that they all are more or less advocates of the idea of a certain relationship between language loss and language acquisition in the sense that pathological language loss or aphasia is considered to be a process of returning to earlier stages of linguistic development. In Jakobson's frequently cited words: "Aphasic losses reproduce in inverse order the sequence of acquisitions in child language" (quoted in Berko-Gleason 1982: 17).

Although Jakobson's so-called regression hypothesis in recent research turned out to be insufficient as far as the explanation of aphasia is concerned, the idea of a relationship of one sort or another between language loss and first or second language acquisition seems to hold a certain attraction to researchers in the field of normal, that is non-pathological language loss. This is especially true as to the description and explanation of what happens linguistically in the case of first or second language loss. Examples in this respect are, among others, Berko-Gleason (1982) who, looking for models that suggest research strategies

in (second) language skill attrition, states that “important general features of language acquisition may be a guide to loss as well” (op.cit.: 19), and Andersen (1982) whose first programmatic assumption about the nature of language attrition runs as follows: “Language attrition is a special case of variation in the acquisition and use of a language or languages and can best be studied, described, documented, explained and understood within a framework that includes all other phenomena of language acquisition and use” (op.cit.: 86).

2 Describing Language Loss

In the description of language loss in terms of language acquisition characteristics attention is mainly paid to intralingual L1 and L2 acquisition phenomena such as generalization and simplification, both leading to a reduction of the range of possible structures and to the interlingual L2 acquisition phenomenon of interference, which, following Weinreich’s (1953) definition, can be described as “those instances of deviation from the norms of either language which occurs in the speech of bilinguals as a result of their familiarity with more than one language” (op.cit.: 1).

Early studies on language loss (Pap 1949; Hasselmo 1961; Haugen 1969; Ostyn 1972) were predominantly preoccupied with processes of (lexical) interference or, in Clyne’s (1967) terms, transference, although phenomena which cannot be explained by interference are reported also (e.g. Ostyn 1972). The growing intralinguistic approach to phenomena in language acquisition has more recently resulted in more attention being paid to intralinguistic phenomena in language loss as well (for an overview, see Clyne’s paper in this volume). One could say that intralinguistic principles such as Andersen’s (1982) “general strategy II” with respect to language attrition (“Whenever there are different devices to express the same basic meaning, use only one of these devices” (op.cit.: 102)) have recently gained importance for the explanation of language loss.

In our view, a central problem in using language acquisition categories in the description of language loss phenomena is the fact that in language acquisition research explanations are provided for the filling of a gap (i.e. the absence of a linguistic element) that exists by definition. For language acquisition research, in other words, there is no need to bother about the question how the gap that is filled through language acquisition came into existence. Children acquiring a first language start from scratch. This means that gaps in their linguistic repertoire were not produced by a process of linguistic change. This gap therefore is not to be explained, nor does it necessarily play a role in the explanation of language acquisition phenomena such as generalization and simplification.

In language loss, however, the situation is different. Language loss research not only has to account for the way in which, linguistically speaking, gaps are filled, but also for the way in which the gaps under investigation came about. For language loss research it is insufficient to consider the emergence and the filling of a gap as one and the same process. Primary language loss research, as we see it, has to face a threefold task. First of all, explanations have to be provided for the emergence of gaps in the language under investigation; secondly, on the basis of this explanation, a linguistic description has to be given of the type of gaps that occur; and thirdly the fillers, i.e. the marked language elements that are consciously or unconsciously used to fill the gaps have to be described.

A great deal of research in non-pathological first language loss is concerned with people losing their L1 in an immigration situation in which a language is spoken that is unfamiliar to the immigrant group. As far as the explanation of language loss, i.e. the emergence of gaps in L1, is concerned in this context two main factors can be brought forward, one being an increased contact with an L2, the other a diminished contact with L1, ultimately leading to "restriction in language use" and "break in linguistic tradition" (Andersen 1982: 87). As far as the linguistic description of the gaps that result from these factors is concerned, they are traditionally considered to lead to a certain degree of adaptation to L2 (as a result of increasing contact with L2) and a certain degree of erosion in L1 (as a result of diminishing contact with L1) respectively. The processes of adaptation and erosion can have consequences on all levels of the linguistic system (lexicon, phonology, morphology, syntax) leading to compensatory strategies resulting in what we call 'repairs'. In accordance with the processes of adaptation and erosion, these repairs are generally considered to have an interlingual or an intralingual nature respectively (see Figure 1).

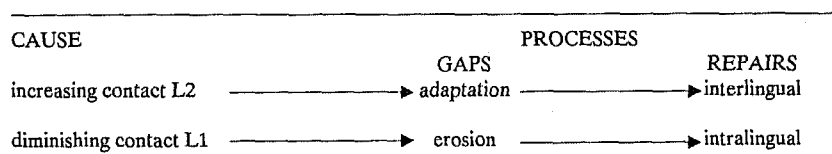


Figure 1. A simple model for the description of language loss

Figure 1 represents a fairly straightforward picture of a process that every researcher in the field will immediately admit to be much more complex in reality. On the basis of theoretical considerations and the language data we studied we suggest that the emergence of gaps and the filling of gaps are relatively independent processes, that should be distinguished in the analysis. In our view

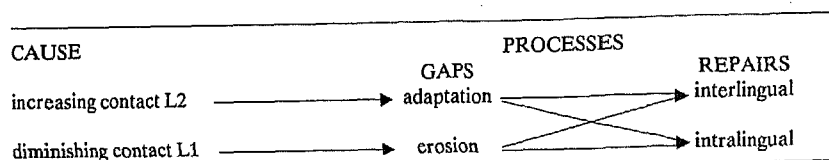


Figure 2. Modified model for the description of language loss

adaptation may also lead to intralingual repairs such as generalization, whereas erosion may also lead to interlingual repairs such as interference. This leads to a slightly modified picture, represented in Figure 2.

3 A Case Study in Dutch Language Loss

With the above model in mind, we started a case study of the loss of Dutch in English language surroundings. The case we studied is A.L., an 83 year old man who has lived for over sixty years in the United States. When he left his region of origin, which is the north of the province of Limburg in the Netherlands, he had had only a very limited amount of formal education. After arriving in the United States he climbed the social ladder through additional education. He ended up as a real estate manager, and was able to retire and move to Florida, where he took up his first profession, rosegrower, as a hobby. Besides his rose growing business, he developed a great interest in writing. Most of this writing (books, poems, letters, songs) is done in English. To his family and friends in the Netherlands, however, he writes in Dutch. We were able to collect 29 letters he wrote to people in the Netherlands over the period 1981-1987, plus a letter written in 1968. These letters form the data for our case study.

Of course, working with written rather than oral data has its consequences for the interpretation that can be given to the case study. For one, writing offers a far better possibility of going back and correcting mistakes that were made, of looking up elements that have been lost or of finding ways to avoid being confronted with lost elements. From our contacts with the writer of the letters, we feel it is safe to state that in this material these kinds of strategies have really had a minimal effect on the data. A.L. never uses dictionaries or grammars of Dutch. As he writes in one of his letters, he simply writes down what comes into his head. His self corrections only apply to corrections that can also be found in oral data. He will, for instance, remark on the correctness of a word he has just written, but he would never go back to an earlier sentence to correct anything.

From the flow of the contents that he is describing it is very clear that he is using language in a way that shows very little premeditation.

An exception to this is formed by the cases in which A.L. deliberately, that is, in an explicitly announced manner, uses the North Limburg dialect which was his mother tongue before emigration. These instances of dialect use, which are very scarce, are in most cases introduced by the phrase *op zich Milsbeeks* (in Milsbeeks). Also the code-switches to English that appear in A.L.'s letters are in most cases announced by phrases such as 'as we call it'. Both categories of data are excluded from our analysis.

4 Analysis of Lexical Choice: Main Verbs

In our data, we started out to study a number of aspects. For this paper, we will limit ourselves to a discussion of some lexical aspects. More specifically, we will be dealing with the choice of main verbs.

We started by collecting from 22 of A.L.'s letters all the verbs that were marked in one way or another. We did not consider auxiliaries or modal verbs. Nor did we take into account English verbs that seemed to be the result of a pro-

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- 1 En ik *kwam* op weg.
(And I *got* underway)
 - 2 En met de tram van Nijmegen *kwamen* vele dingen uitgegooit.
(And with the tram from Nijmegen a lot of things *were* thrown out)
 - 3 Maar anders om *verder te gaan*.
(But else *to pass away*)
 - 4 Toen onze kleine M. bijna van ons *afging*.
(When our little M. nearly *left* us)
 - 5 Een hand *uitrijken*.
(To give a hand)
 - 6 Ik hoop maar dat B. en jij het tamelijk goed hebben *doorgebracht* deze winter.
(I sure hope that B. and you have *got* through the winter quite well)
 - 7 Je moet maar niet *zien* hoe of dat ik schrijf.
(You should not *look at* how I write)
 - 8 Hij *zag* dan *naar* zijn eigen dochters.
(He *looked at* his own daughters)
 - 9 Dat maakt een mens erg goed *vinden*.
(That makes a man *feel* good)
 - 10 Ik heb van alles *gewerkt* hier.
(I have *worked* in everything here)
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Table 1. Non-Interferences

cess of code-switching. It is, of course, not always easy to tell whether the occurrence of an English verb is due to code switching or not. We applied two different criteria: we disregarded the English word when the context contained a clue to the code switch and when the word was embedded in a larger English context.

An issue our analysis does not take into account either, is the fact that some language elements that are interpreted as language loss also appear in the data in correct Dutch. This, however, only happens in a limited number of cases. One example is the one correct use of *opbellen* (to telephone) as compared with ten wrong occurrences. We will come back to this example later.

We collected 73 different marked verbs, with a total frequency of 123, which is about 5 per cent of the total number of main verbs that occurred in the data. Interestingly enough, the first analyses of other open lexical categories (nouns, adjectives and adverbs) yielded more or less the same results: about 5 per cent of these lexical elements, too, turned out to be marked in some way or other.

In an analysis just in terms of interference and non-interference, our data would lead us to conclude that at least 80 per cent of the marked verbs, and maybe even as much as 90 per cent, ought to be characterized as interference. Only 10 per cent of the marked verbs can in no way be related to the bilinguality of the situation. The verbs in this category are all represented in Table 1.

In the category of interference two main categories can be distinguished. First, there are loanwords from English, which may be adapted to some extent to the Dutch situation (for example *printen*, containing the English 'to print' and the Dutch verb ending '-en' (cf. Table 2).

A.L.	Dutch	English
bekomen (3x)	worden	become
printen (3x)	drukken	print
publiceren	publiceren	publish
broken	gebroken	broken
compose	componeren	compose

Table 2. Loanwords

Second, there is a category of loan shifts that could either be explained as calques or as semantic loans (for the terminology, cf. Haugen 1969): the items may be considered literal translations of English, or they may be regarded as Dutch verbs which obtain another meaning through the influence of English. In this category we included verbs of which the main verb stem itself is marked as

A.L.	Main verbs		Morphological processes and complements		
	Dutch	English	A.L.	Dutch	English
oproepen	opbellen	call (up)	wegdrijven	verdrijven	drive away
aanroepen			spelen	bespelen	play
uitstaan	uitspringen	stand out	ingeven	toegeven	give in
leven			wonen	schrijven	beschrijven
vroedvrouwen	—	to midwife	uitzenden	wegzenden	send out

Table 3. Interferences (Loan shifts and Literal translation)

well as non-marked verbs that are connected with a marked complement or derivational structure (cf. Table 3).

We take it that the category of loanwords is rather clear. The second category, that of loanshifts, however, may need some more explanation. A typical example of the first group within this category is *oproepen* instead of *opbellen*. One can consider *oproepen* as a literal translation of 'to call up' (in the meaning of 'to telephone') or one can choose to describe it as the correct Dutch word *oproepen* which has received an extended meaning under the influence of the English *to call up*. An example of the second group is the use of the verb *wegdrijven* in stead of *verdrijven* under the influence of English *to drive away* ('dislodge').

When we want to distinguish between the processes of adaptation and erosion mentioned earlier, the easiest group of marked verbs to place in the model is the non-interference group. Since the appearance of the form is not relatable to contact with English, the repair must be considered intralingual. And since a contrastive analysis of English and Dutch does not provide any explanation for the emergence of the lexical gap, that gap must have been the result of erosion. With the interference category, however, things are much more complicated. The influence of English, which caused the verbs to be categorized as interference, can be situated at the level of both the gap-creating process as well as at the level of the repairing process. We want to put forward that in the case of borrowings, English always affects the repair process and may be the cause of gap creation. For the other group of verbs, the contact with English is responsible for the creation of gaps, and may or may not influence the choice of a repair. This would mean that this category consists essentially of semantic loans and not of calques.

What is typical in the verbs in this loan shift category is that the semantic structure that underlies them is different in Dutch and in English. The reality that they represent has, as it were, been differently conceptualized in Dutch and

English. A number of examples might clarify what we mean. When, in the course of linguistic evolution, a part of reality which was before that time not lexicalized for some reason or other needs a linguistic representation, a number of strategies can be followed to come up with such a representation. A popular strategy in this respect is the extension of meaning of an existing linguistic element through metaphor or metonymy (Aitchison 1987). The earlier mentioned verb *opbellen* in Dutch is an example of extension of meaning through metonymic use. The act of making use of the telephone is described by means of extending the meaning of one of the actions which is part of telephoning. The same process was carried out in American English. The difference between the two processes is that in the two cases the meaning 'telephoning' is attached to the meaning of different subactions, ringing in Dutch and calling in American English. In the same way, the Dutch *uitspringen* (literally: jump out) and the English *stand out* are both metaphorical usages of physical actions to denote the state of being remarkable. In other cases Dutch has coined a separate word, not directly related to other concepts, whereas English has extended the meaning of another word, for example, the Dutch *wonen* and the English *to live* plus prepositional phrase of place. Still another example that belongs here is the case in which one language has lexicalized a certain part of reality and the other language has not. That is, for example, the case with the English *to midwife* for which there is no Dutch equivalent.

The differences between Dutch and English we have just described are really differences in the social construction of reality. These kinds of differences tend to be negotiated away in interaction. In the case of one Dutchman interacting with a lot of speakers of American English, these negotiations must inevitably lead to the adaptation of the conceptual system of the Dutch speaker to that of the English speakers around him. This adaptation has as its immediate consequence that a gap is created. Words such as *opbellen*, *uitspringen* and *wonen* do not refer any longer to the part of reality they refer to in Dutch. The most interesting thing about this process is that the result of it may in some sense be language loss, but, at the same time the process itself is really much more like a process of language acquisition. Nothing is being forgotten, but the social construction of reality of interaction partners has been taken over, just as is the case with cognitive development accompanying first language acquisition. Another interesting point is that gaps are not being created in all cases. Since, in the case of *to midwife*, there is no Dutch lexical element, no gap can be created. What is created, however, is the feeling that a gap does exist.

One can even argue that in the case of adaptation no gap is created at all. From the point of view of the language user, this is certainly true. The language user as 'language adaptor' probably never has the feeling of not being able to ex-

press a certain concept in Dutch. He does not feel the need to repair anything. From a more objective point of view, however, the loss of the concept does create a gap, and the alternative expression that is used can be seen as a repair. In this sense, the main point discussed in this paper still holds, but one should keep in mind that gaps and repairs may stand for somewhat different concepts in erosion and adaption.

This explanation implies, of course, that one accepts that the Dutch concept is lost through the adaption process. It is feasible, however, that what takes place is not a process of adaptation, but of expansion. At least in some cases there is evidence that the English concept does not replace the Dutch one, but that it serves as a synonym. A clear example of this fact is the earlier cited *oproepen* — *to call up*, which also appears as *opbellen* and *telefoneren* in the data. In that case, of course, the process studied no longer resembles language acquisition; it simply is language acquisition.

Setting aside the issue whether the process described here is really a form of loss or of acquisition, we can now turn our attention to what happens when the gap (or the feeling that there is a gap, or the newly acquired concept) needs to be repaired (or filled in, or expressed). A person in a language contact situation can do so by borrowing an English lexical element. In that case we have an instance of adaptation leading to interlinguistic repair. He can also express his altered concept by means of Dutch linguistic material he has at his disposal. In this case, the gap filler may look like a literal translation from English, but it need not be considered that way. If he has connected the concept “telephoning” metonymically to the concept “call”, a strictly intralinguistic repair would result in *oproepen* without this being a literal translation from English. In this way, the examples cited before result in *oproepen* (call up), *uitstaan* (stand out), *leven* (live), *vroedvrouwen* (to midwife).

Up till now we have said very little about the subgroup of the second category of verbs in which we had put unmarked main verbs combined with a marked complement or morphological process. For a number of these verbs it is easy to see that they can be accounted for in much the same way as the loan shifts applying to main verbs. The earlier mentioned example *wegdrijven*, *verdrijven* — *to drive away* is one of these verbs. Another interesting example in this respect is the triplet *overschrijven*, *herschrijven* — *to write over*. A number of other verbs are much more difficult to interpret in this way. We believe that they can be described in the same way, but we have not worked it out completely as yet. The main problem we are up against is the interpretation of morphological rules and elements such as prepositions in semantic terms. We will try to make clear what we mean by way of an example. A whole category of verbs exists that can either be transitive or intransitive in English but that can only be intransitive in

Dutch. Two examples of this list are *play/spelen*, and *grow/groeien*. The corresponding transitive verbs in Dutch are *bespelen*, morphologically derived from *spelen* and *kweken*, which is not morphologically related to the intransitive verb. In both cases we find our informant uses the intransitive Dutch verb in a transitive way. It is, of course, very tempting to describe the two verbs in the same way as the group of main verb loan shifts. Without going into detail it is clear that in the case of *groeien*—*kweken*—*grow*, the relation between both verbs (transitive and intransitive) at a conceptual level is stronger in English than in Dutch. Accepting, however, that this is also the case in the instance of the verbs *spelen*, *bespelen*—*play*, is much more debatable. It would mean that the application of an explicit derivation would be considered to result in larger conceptual differences than the application of a zero-morpheme derivation. As we mentioned, we are still working on this point.

5 Conclusion

All in all, we can say that by far the largest part of the marked verbs in our data are explainable as a form of adaptation of the semantic structure our informant has made to the semantic structure that is used by people he interacts with. In only one of these cases (which occurs three times) does he use a repair which we tend to categorize as interlingual: “Rozenkweker *bekomt* Chinesees in Hollywood” (Rosegrower becomes Chinese in Hollywood). In all other cases, the categorisation as intralingual repair seems to be more adequate.

Erosion accounts for only a very limited number of the marked verb forms. There is the small category of eroded elements giving rise to intralingual repairs which we mentioned earlier. There is also a small group of eroded elements which are replaced by intralingual elements. We noted four different elements, appearing six times in the data. This does not mean that erosion is less important than adaptation as a process. Whereas an adaptation process always results in the markedness of the verb in question, erosion processes can go much more unnoticed. Still it is true that a more massive erosion process would inevitably lead to difficulties in compensating in an unmarked way.

Still, these figures suggest that erosion may, at least at the lexical level, not be as important as is sometimes suggested. The fact that only 5 per cent of the verbs are markedly affected by loss seems to point in the same direction. Our informant has had hardly any contact with Dutch for more than sixty years. If the reduction of contact with L1 were ultimately to lead to the disappearance of the first language, as Grosjean (1982) suggests, we would expect sixty years of separation to result in much more than just 5 per cent of non-repairable loss. On the

other hand, the conceptualizations of the world on which Dutch and English are based, are similar in a great many respects. If language loss results from an adaptation to the L2 conceptual system, we would not expect the effect on the lexicon to be very large. Anyway, the upper limit of language loss would, in the case of English and Dutch, not be the total disappearance of Dutch. Whether this observation turns out to be valid will have to be shown in analyses of and comparisons with language contact situations in which languages that are typologically more diverse are included.

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