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First Language Attrition in a Second Language Learning Environment: The Case of Korean-English Late Bilinguals

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A Thesis Submitted for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Language Teaching and Learning, Department of Applied Language Studies and Linguistics, The University of Auckland, 2007
Abstract

This thesis explores L1 attrition among young Korean-English late bilinguals. Thirty Korean immigrants to New Zealand, who had arrived at the age of 12-13 years and had spent at least 2 years in New Zealand, participated in the study. Ten monolingual Korean children aged 12 years served as a comparison group for L1 data. Linguistic data in both L1 and L2 were elicited by a standardised picture-naming test and a story-retelling task supplemented by a stimulated recall protocol. Information related to social variables and language use patterns was elicited through a questionnaire and interviews.

Skehan (1996; 1998; 2001) proposes three dimensions of linguistic performance—accuracy, fluency, and complexity. The general findings suggest that accuracy and lexical diversity in L1 are most susceptible to attrition and that there is general positive transfer from L1 to L2 skills. While there is no direct negative interaction between L1 and L2 proficiency, analysis reveals that increasing L2 fluency and a decrease in L1 use have possible indirect effects on attrition in L1 accuracy but not in L1 lexical diversity. The data suggest that, while the frequency of return visits to the homeland is an important social variable, language use involving the father and siblings is also an important factor in attrition or maintenance of L1 proficiency of adolescent late bilinguals.

Qualitative analysis conducted on five cases corroborates the quantitative findings. Analyses of speech samples reveal that synthetic structures with semantic ambiguity are most susceptible to L1 attrition. The qualitative analysis also highlights the role of L2 socialisation in L1 attrition in adolescent immigrant children who negotiate their language use and identities in an L2-dominant environment and show different patterns of attrition in their L1.
Dedication

To the memory of my father who has always been in my heart throughout this long journey although he could not see this achievement in his life.

And to my mother, for her overwhelming support and immense love for her daughters.
Acknowledgments

I would like to give my first thanks to Dr. Donna Starks for guiding me throughout the years of my academic growth with her insightful suggestions and stimulating comments that kept me moving forward. I am grateful for her patience and time devoted to helping me refine my thoughts and express them precisely. Without her generosity for spending so many hours reading and rereading my work, this thesis would not have been able to come to fruition.

I also wish to give my sincere thanks to Professor Rod Ellis, whose recommendations given during the early stages of this project turned out to be the basic enquiries I pursued throughout the project. Every comment Rod gave was enlightening and challenging and helped me be prepared for any difficulties I could face in this long journey.

My deepest thanks go to Dr. Cathie Elder for lending me her extraordinary expertise and inspiring intellect in designing and conducting this project. Since she introduced me to the academic world, Cathie always believed in my abilities and has always been the source of courage and wisdom as I made every step forward. Although she could not continue to be my supervisor, her unwavering support and genuine care sent from a distance enabled me to make my way through toward the goal.

I am sincerely grateful to many individuals who gave me various supports which made this project possible: to Dr. Gary Barkhuizen for reading my proposal and supporting me as acting supervisor when Cathie was on leave; to Dr. Shawn Loewen for assuring me that I was on the right track with statistics; to many staff members and PhD students in DALSL for variously participating in the validation procedure for research instruments and my pilot study—particularly to Dr. Jenefer Philp, Dr. Rosemary Erlam, Janet von Randow, and Penny Hacker for spending extra time for me; to Margaret Kitchen who helped and listened to me whenever I turned to her for support; to Michelle Allsop-Smith for her help with my pilot data collection solely based on her friendship; to Tom Delaney, Kathy Ooi, and Min-Jeong Kim
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I should not forget my sincerest friends Keiko and Jin-Hyung who gave emotional support when things seemed hopeless. They even provided me with practical support as they had gone through the same path ahead of me. I particularly owe a great debt to Jin-Hyung for her ever-lasting friendship and her expertise in linguistics.

My warmest thanks go to my sisters, who have always been my unfailing supporters. My special thanks to Sun Jin who secured participants in Korea. I dedicate this thesis to my father, who had always wished me to return what I owed to the world, and my mother, who has always championed her daughters. I give a big thank to my sons Sang Yeob and Sang Bum who have been my source of energy as they grew up to be fine young men alongside my study. I am so grateful to my husband Dong Myung who taught his sons to be proud of their mother and encouraged me to accomplish my life-time dream without financial worries.

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I am grateful to the Faculty of Arts in the University of Auckland for granting a Faculty of Arts Research Fund that enabled me to complete data analysis. I also would like to thank the DELNA (the Diagnostic English Language Needs Assessment) programme and the Department of Applied Language Studies and Linguistics at the University of Auckland for generously purchasing tools for data collection and analysis.
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<tr>
<td>AC</td>
<td>Accusative case</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACC</td>
<td>Accuracy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ADV</td>
<td>Adverbial suffix/adverbialiser</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ASSR</td>
<td>Assertive suffix</td>
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<tr>
<td>CAUS</td>
<td>Causative suffix</td>
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<td>CMPLR</td>
<td>Complementiser suffix</td>
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<td>Commitative suffix</td>
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<td>DAT</td>
<td>Dative case</td>
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<td>DEF</td>
<td>Deferential speech level</td>
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<td>Delimiter</td>
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<td>ESL</td>
<td>English as a second language</td>
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<td>Fluency</td>
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<tr>
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<td>K-E</td>
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<tr>
<td>L1</td>
<td>First language</td>
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<td>L2</td>
<td>Second language</td>
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<td>L-D</td>
<td>Lexical diversity</td>
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<td>LOC</td>
<td>Locative</td>
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<td>M-D</td>
<td>Morphological density</td>
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<td>Nominaliser suffix</td>
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<td>RL</td>
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