

Attrition and innovation: Two sides of the same coin

Tanja Kupisch

University of Konstanz, UiT The Arctic University of Norway

In the relevant literature, the term “attrition” has often been used in the context of individual speakers who have become bilingual either late in life (late bilinguals or second language learners) or early in life (early bilinguals or heritage speakers), and whose linguistic performance (and arguably competence) in their L1, or one of their L1s, was more “monolingual-like” at an earlier stage compared to a later stage. By contrast, the term “innovation” is typically used in grammaticalization-oriented studies, where an entire linguistic community (monolingual or bi-/multilingual) has developed “new” patterns, i.e., patterns that differ to those of previous generations.

In this talk, I will argue that what has come to be called “attrition” and what has traditionally been referred to as “innovation” are two sides of the same coin because attrition always goes along with innovation. The difference between the cases illustrated in the bilingualism literature and those illustrated in the grammaticalization literature are primarily quantitative rather than qualitative. I will demonstrate my point on the basis of article use, comparing (i) long term diachronic change (Latin to Romance), (ii) incipient grammaticalization (German), (iii) long term language contact (Molisian Slavic) and (iv) data from heritage speakers in various language settings (Chinese and Turkish in the Netherlands, Romance Languages in contact with Germanic languages).

Definite articles tend to evolve from demonstratives, and indefinite ones from numerals. Numerous studies have shown that the grammaticalization of articles is a process of gradual expansion towards an ever wider range of grammatical contexts of use, starting in contexts of specific reference and expanding towards nonspecific reference (e.g., see Greenberg 1978, Heine 1997, Givón 1981, Renzi 1976, Breu 2012, Flick 2012). This expansion of usage contexts goes along with the disappearance of contexts in which bare nouns are still admitted (Longobardi 1999). Based on examples from the literature (e.g., Dogruöz & Backus 2011, Aalberse et al. 2017, Montrul & Ionin 2012), to which I will add fresh data, I will show that heritage speakers move –back and forth– on the same continuum. While innovation and change is slow in monolingual communities, it gets accelerated in contexts with a dominant majority language.