

Phonological and lexical attrition after a study-abroad experience

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When language learners stop using a second language (L2), they experience language attrition (i.e., their linguistic skills almost invariably decrease). The present study extends previous work by examining patterns of both phonological and lexical attrition in English-native learners of French. We document attrition by examining the performance of these learners at multiple time points following their return from a study-abroad program (both soon after their return from France and after 6 months back in the US).

In Experiment 1, we investigate attrition in the perception of L2-sounds that are acoustically similar to native-language sounds (e.g., French /u/ is similar to English /u/) versus sounds that only exist in the L2 (e.g., French /y/). While in language acquisition research (e.g., Flege, 1987) it has been argued that L2-specific sounds (e.g., French /y/) are acquired more native-like than similar sounds (French /u/), it is not clear whether the same pattern holds true for attrition.

In Experiment 2, we test whether lexical status of words (cognates, e.g., French/English *bus*, vs. noncognates, e.g., French *voiture*/English *car*) influences attrition of lexical and phonological knowledge. Language acquisition research (e.g., Paterson & Goldrick, 2009) suggests that lexical status influences the nativelikeness of L2-words even at the acoustic level, but no studies to date have investigated whether in language attrition we find a reversal of this pattern.

References

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