Adult bilingualism: the big picture

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Recent research on adult bilingualism shows that selective aspects of grammar become unstable in speakers experiencing native language (L1) attrition from long-term exposure to a second language. These are the same aspects that remain variable even in highly proficient non-native (L2) speakers of the same language (Sorace 2011, 2016). Why do we see this convergence between L1 attrition and L2 acquisition? I will first show that the structures affected involve "complex contingencies" (Phillips & Ehrenhofer 2015) that require efficient integration of information across (syntactic, pragmatic and contextual) domains, and depend on the interaction of linguistic knowledge and cognitive control. I will then consider the possibility that the convergence between L1 attrition and L2 acquisition may reflect a cognitive reorganization that allows successful late bilinguals to handle two languages efficiently. In other words, the 'good language learner' may be the one whose native language is most open to change. Understanding the big picture requires an interdisciplinary account that brings together research on different facets of bilingualism and combines the strengths of both linguistic and cognitive models.