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Morphological attrition among Russians in Hungary

Morphological attrition has received considerable attention in bilingualism and attrition studies. It has been confirmed by a number of studies that attrition weakens the grammatical coherence in the mind of the speaker and that monolingual controls usually outperform attriters in grammatical judgment tasks. However, to what extent extralinguistic variables can justify this difference remains a question. The present study focuses on the first language attrition of Russians living in Hungary, focusing on grammatical judgment. All participants (N = 50) have spent more than seven years in Hungary, and their age ranges from 22 to 72 years old. The study's main aim was to investigate the degree of extralinguistic variables, such as age, language choice, contact and attitude, frequency of use, length of residence, interacting with L1 of individuals on their grammatical judgment. The future tense formation task was developed to elicit data on morphological attrition. Together, these results provide vital understanding of how attriters' language production differs from monolinguals' and the main factors contributing to language attrition. The present study's findings correspond to the previous studies that the immigrant group did significantly worse in comparison with the control group. However, the current study failed to find the link between extralinguistic variables and morphological attrition in L1.

1. Introduction

The current study was inspired not only by personal experience, but also by many researchers who are active in the language attrition field, looking for the answer: "why do we forget our language?" Psychological theories such as decay, suppression, and interference have failed to explain the phenomena while linguistic theories are insufficient to account for language attrition. Nowadays, first language (L1) attrition is defined as

'... the phenomena that arise in the native language of a sequential bilingual as the consequence of the co-activation of languages, cross-linguistic transfer or disuse, at any stage of the second language (L2) development and use, as language attrition. First language (L1) attrition is therefore considered to be the process by

which a) pre-existing linguistic knowledge becomes less accessible or is modified to some extent as a result of the acquisition of a new language, and b) L1 production, processing, or comprehension are affected by the presence of this other language. (Schmid and Köpke 2017: 637–638).

This research focuses on the language use patterns of the Russian community in Hungary, in particular the changes in their grammar. The participants of the current study moved to Hungary in the 80s/90s and after settling in Hungary, most of them have never returned or rarely visited Russia.

2. Areas of L1 attrition

Language attrition (henceforth LA) has been studied from different perspectives, such as psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics, and neurolinguistics. Generally, language attrition can be manifested at all language levels:

- lexical (Jarvis 2019);
- grammatical level (Gürel 2008);
- phonetic level (Cook 2003; Cancila et al. 2005);
- pragmatic level (Canagarajah 2001).

The main subject of discussion and research in the current paper is *grammatical attrition*. Reconstruction of the L1 grammar is possible due to extensive L2 exposure and the lack of L1 input (Schmitt 2004). Numerous studies have reported an impact of language attrition on this linguistic domain. According to Bardovi-Harlig and Stringer (2013), LA demonstrates the simplification of L1 grammar; additionally, transfer of structural patterns was also reported (Matras 2009; Gürel 2008; Pavlenko and Jarvis 2002; Jarvis 2013; Pavlenko 2006). The evidence of the cross-language influence of three languages, and the grammatical gender became semantic gender due to languages not sharing the same features according to Gumperz and Wilson (1971). The competition of L1 and L2 grammatical concepts were explained by Gürel (2008), proposing that the attrition might be avoided in L1 if the grammar of L2 has a stricter construction form than the L1 of a speaker; for example, L1 allows two optional structures, but only one is acceptable in L2, and that structure will not be attrited. She further proposes that overcorrection in L1, on the other hand, may lead to attrition. As for the attrition of Russian among adult bilingual speakers (Russian – English), Pavlenko (2003) concluded the appearance of a poor case system, loss of verbal aspect and improper use of the verb of motion in L1.

According to previous studies conducted to determine the effect of the use of the future tense formation task on language attrition, the usage of the Future Simple verb aspect was considered a feature to differentiate the LA phenomena (Altenberg 1991; Gürel 2008; Raidt 1997; Pavlenko 2003; Pavlenko 2010; Pavlenko and Jarvis 2002; Waas 1996). Thus, the bilinguals experiencing language attrition are

expected to simplify the tense formation. The future tense is considered the weakest link in the grammar aspect of the language, being acquired last after the present and past tenses (Silva–Corvalan 1991).

The base idea of the future tense formation in both Russian and Hungarian expresses the moment of action, determined by the verb phrase, and the moment of speaking. Both languages have an identical number of tenses: past, present and future, which also can and is expressed by the present tense. As for the experiment I conducted, the future tense formation was the most preferable to observe.

The difference in future tense formation lays within the verbal form. Three tenses (past, present and future) are formed with the use of the Imperfective verbal aspect forms, when the future and the present tenses can be produced by the use of the Perfective aspect form of the verb. In Russian language two types of the future tense exist: Future Perfect (the Perfective aspect – meaning the result of a process) and Future Simple (the Imperfective aspect – meaning a process, without a result yet). Future Perfect reflects on the intention to accomplish the task in the future, e.g., *выходить* “to go out” – *выйду* “I will go out”. The perfective aspect of the verb is synthetic and is formed with the use of various prefixes and plays an essential role in the Future Perfect tense formation, e.g., *на-* added to the present tense form *писáть* “to write” – *напишет* “s/he will write / s/he will have written”.

On the other hand, the Future Simple tense represents an action which will be accomplished in the future, with uncertain results, e.g., *ходить* “to go” – *буду ходить* “I will go”. Thus, the aspect of the verb in this conjugation form is based on the appropriate person and future form of the auxiliary verb *быть* “be” plus the imperfective infinitive of the main verb. However, if the main verb is *быть* “be”, it remains the same (Rozental et al. 2010).

Thus, *Она сегодня получила письмо от подруги, завтра напишет ей ответ* “Today she received a letter from a friend, tomorrow she **will write** a response to her” is an expected correct version of future tense formation of the verb, whereas *Она сегодня получила письмо от подруги, завтра будет писать ей ответ* “Today she received a letter from a friend, tomorrow she **will be writing** a response to her” is a less preferred form of verb usage.

The forms of the Hungarian future tense are translated into Russian as the forms of the Imperfective verb aspect, as well as the Perfective verb aspect. The perfectivity of the verb in Hungarian involves the prefix right before the verb in a neutral sentence, and right after the verb in sentences containing a focused constituent or a negative particle (Kenesei et al. 1998). Besides, the perfectivity can be expressed in most of the cases with the prefix *meg-* (having no direct adverbial meaning) and *el-* “away”.

The imperfectivity in Hungarian as the phenomenon present in the Russian language cannot be expressed, only through various categories – habitual, progressive, iterative aspects (Kenesei et al. 1998).

The Hungarian future form consists of the conceptual verb plus finite form of the present tense aspect of the verb *fog* (3rd Singular) + *verb infinitive* (–*ni*) based on the conjugation: *Fogok csinálni* “(Я) *буду делать*” “I will do”.

However, the Hungarian future tense formation is more sophisticated. The future can be described with the use of the Present tense, which will create an absolute tense, meaning the grammatical expression of time reference (usually past, present or future) relative to “now” as the moment of speaking. In this case, the verb remains in the **present** tense form: *Hamarosan Oroszországba megyek* “Soon I am going to Russia”, thus creating the form of the near future, with some plan or form of certainty in this type of Future expression.

The next variation is based on the verbs in the complex sentence, such as *Megmosom a kezem, megvacsorázom* “I will wash my hands and will have a dinner”. A sentence is “linear”, so the events follow each other that way:

1. *Megmosom a kezem* “I wash my hands”
2. *Megvacsorázom* “I will have my dinner”

Feltételes mód “conditional for future” is used to express the future in the Hungarian language. For instance, *holnap én is elutaznék Olaszországba* “tomorrow I will travel to Italy” – I may or may not travel, but I have the willingness to do so.

However, the grammatical category of verb aspect has not been studied to its fullest and has not been comprehensively dealt with, neither descriptively nor theoretically (Kenesei et al. 1998).

For making a connection between Russian and Hungarian future tenses it is rather helpful to create a system of verb aspects, visually guiding the speaker/learner. However, it will still be problematic to compare forms of the Hungarian and Russian languages due to a particular quality of the latter – the result of the action is visible in the structure.

In the modern Russian language, five forms of verbal tenses are recognized:

- One present tense – *он рисует* “He draws”
- Two past tenses – imperfective *красил* “I–MASC/you–MASC/he painted” and perfective *покрасил* “I–MASC/you–MASC/he had painted”
- Two future tenses – imperfective *буду петь* “I will be singing” and perfective *спою* “I will sing”

It is crucial to mention that it is rather impossible to make direct translation parallels between two aspects of the future in Hungarian and Russian. In addition, in the Hungarian language it is possible to use the present tense to express the nearest future or particular events in the future, which is the opposite in Russian. Russian verbs of perfective aspect have no present tense form, which explains the disproportion. Thus, for describing the context, the situation and the tense marking, *majd* “later”, *akkor* “then”, *hamarosan* “soon” etc. play an essential role in use and translation of the tense forms.

There are no studies that observed the language attrition of the Russian language in Hungary, which allows us to introduce novelty to the field of language at-

trition. All in all, the situation is a unique opportunity to investigate the attrition of Russian and expand the field of LA.

3. Research questions and hypotheses of the study

This study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. To what extent language attrition can be observed on the grammatical level in Russians living in Hungary in comparison to the control group?
2. To what extent can extralinguistic variables (age, length of residence, contact, choice and attitudes towards the language) explain grammatical language attrition?

Based on the above questions, I hypothesize that:

1. The control group (monolingual Russians) will significantly outperform the target group in the grammatical judgment test.
2. Extralinguistic variables will explain the grammatical correctness task results.

4. Participants

To answer the research questions, two groups were included in this study: a **control group** (N=50) of monolingual Russian residents in Russia from the central and southern parts of the country and a **target group** (N=50) of Russian emigrants living in Hungary (they migrated mostly in the 1980s and 1990s).

The main selection criteria for the participants in the two groups were the following:

- the control group – to be monolingual residents in the L1 environment with low or no exposure to any L2 in any circumstances;
- the target group – a minimum of seven years of residence in Hungary.

For all participants, Russian is their L1, which is standardized across their homeland, Russia. Dialectal phonetic and vocabulary differences will not be tested in this study; thus, the dialectal differences should not affect the results. However, it should be noted that most of the regions that the participants originally are from include the dialect *Surzhyk*, due to close interaction with the Ukrainian language and relatively close borders.

After settling in Hungary, most participants have never returned or rarely visited their home country. It is important to note that all data was collected before the events of February 24th, 2022.

Most studies focusing on less than 50 participants could not find a significant effect of the frequency of use (FOU) on language attrition, so in this research both the target and the control group consists of 50 subjects (see Table 1).

	Target group		Control group	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Age	45.14	11.32	41.1	10.92
Length of residence	18.64	9.97	N/A	N/A
Age at emigration	26.5	8.71	N/A	N/A

Table 1. Descriptive data of the target (n=50) and the control group (n=50)

The target group includes 50 participants (38 female and 12 male) who moved to Hungary a minimum of 7 years prior to data collection. The two groups were matched based on age (see Table 1), however, the gender distribution is different. The mean length of residence in the target group is 18.64 years, with a minimum age of 25 and a maximum of 71 years. The age of emigration is quite diverse for all participants, with a mean of 26.5 years of age at emigration. Most of the participants had had no knowledge of the Hungarian language, either grammatical constructions or vocabulary, before moving to Hungary. They come from different socioeconomic backgrounds and have different levels of education: 33 participants have higher education and 17 professional technical school as their highest level of education. The language they use to speak with their Hungarian spouses is predominantly Hungarian, as the majority met during the 1980s and 1990s in the Soviet Union. According to the questionnaire, 34 participants have Hungarian spouses, 10 Russian spouses, and 6 have no partners.

The control group consists of 50 participants to match the target group, with 46 female and 4 male participants, between the ages of 25 and 65. Thirty participants have high level of education and 20 professional technical school education (also known as TVET, for *technical and vocational training and education*). The participants in the group are from the Voronezh region, Saint–Petersburg and Moscow. The Russian language is relatively standardized across the country and a standard variety of the language is used in schools and universities, on TV, and is generally spoken among the country’s inhabitants in Russian Federation. Therefore, dialectal phonetic and vocabulary differences are not included in this study; thus, the dialectal differences should not affect the results due to the aforementioned reasons.

Participants were contacted with the help of social network sites such as Facebook. The Russian public pages were the primary target for participant recruitment, for example, *Az Oroszok*, *Самовар*, etc. The blog www.LiveJournal.com was used to create an ad to find more volunteers to participate in the study. Participants in general were found by using the snowball approach, and interviews were conducted either online (Facebook Messenger, WhatsApp, Viber) or in a personal meeting at home or other social places, with relatively lower noise levels, to obtain good–quality audio recordings. Most of the participants come from Hévíz, Budapest, Pécs, and Keszthely.

5. Methodology

The Social Personal Background Questionnaire was administered to collect information on personal background, frequency of language use and language attitudes, designed for a group of bilingual immigrants (Schmid, 2011, retrieved from www.languageattrition.org). The questionnaire was adapted and translated into Russian. The Social Personal Background Questionnaire contains closed and open questions that were coded according to the developers' instructions of the instruments. The questionnaire includes 79 questions which can be merged into three sub-categories according to Cronbach's reliability:

1. Personal background information;
2. Frequency of use (FOU) ($\alpha=.86$);
3. Attitude towards L1 ($\alpha=.6$).

To answer the study's research questions, the future tense formation task (Baladzhava 2013) was used to collect the required data. This task was used due to the Russian language main feature of the sentence, which depends on the verb aspect.

The task includes ten sentences with a blank space to complete with verbs conjugated in the future form. Participants were expected to fill the spaces with one word according to the Perfective aspect of the future formation, as the given sentences require it.

For example:

Она сегодня получила письмо от подруги, завтра _____ ей ответ.
 "Today she received a letter from a friend_{fem}, tomorrow _____ her a response".

The expected answer is:

*Она сегодня получила письмо от подруги, завтра **напишет** ей ответ.*
 "Today she received a letter from a friend_{fem}, tomorrow (she) **will write** her response".

The incorrect answer in this case would be:

*Она сегодня получила письмо от подруги, завтра **будет писать** ей ответ.*
 "Today she received a letter from a friend_{fem}, tomorrow (she) **will be writing** her response".

The scoring system was introduced, which included:

- an error recognized and corrected counted as 1 point;
- an error recognized but not corrected or corrected wrongly counted as 0.5 point.

Consequently, for each group of sentences, the score could range from 0 (no errors recognized) to 10 (all errors recognized and corrected).

6. Procedure

A printed version of the task was delivered to each participant to test their future tense verb production skills. The participants were not given the correct answers even after data collection. The correct answers were counted as long as they made sense in the sentence. However, if the participants provided a semantic or an auxiliary verb in future tense with the verb's infinitive, the answer was counted as incorrect, for instance, *будет писать* [will be writing], instead of *напишет* [will write]. Maximum points were related to the number of sentences provided, making a total of ten points for each correct answer, except the self-correction, which gives the participants 0.5 points for the sentence instead of a whole 1 point.

The participants had a time limit; in this case, it was approximately 5 minutes due to online testing, which allows us to test the productive, explicit language knowledge and ensure the testing atmosphere is as close as possible, resembling real-time conversation (Schmid 2011). The task included a piece of paper with ten sentences, which were blank spaces to fit the verb in the future tense. The participants were notified about the time limit, and they had the freedom to use as many words as possible to complete the sentence.

In addition, the data elicited from the SPBQ was analyzed to see the pattern emerging between the extralinguistic variables and correct grammar answers.

7. Results

This part of the research aims to find the difference in the grammar task performance between the control and target groups. The exact task was to produce the verbs in the future tense to fill the gaps in the sentences. The difference between groups was slightly significant with a big gap in minimum and maximum of correct answers (see Table 2).

	N	Mean (max. 10)	Standard deviation	Min.	Max.
Control group	50	9.28	0.66	8	10
Target group	50	7.71	1.81	2	10

Table 2. Differences between the two groups on the future tense production tasks

The independent samples t-test was performed in order to discover the difference between two groups, control and target, including the independent and dependent variables, such as language choice, contact, attitude, length of residence and age. A significant difference ($t(98) = -5.383$, $p < .05$) was found, showing the reversal in the directionality of the study.

Figure 1 shows the findings in the future tense formation task on a boxplot, and the attrited group shows more within-group variation than the control group (i.e. minimum and maximum between upper and lower whiskers). Two of the participants went beyond the minimum range of the boxplot and became outliers in the study, with the minimum results of the correct answers for the grammatical judgment test.

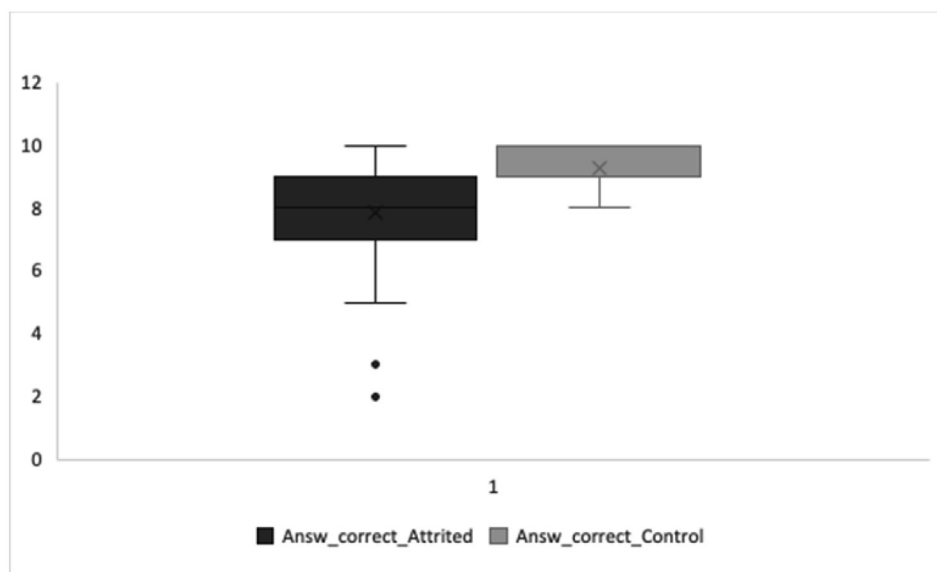


Figure 1. The distribution of results in the control and target groups on the future tense formation task

A Pearson correlation factor was calculated to determine the relationship between the correct answers in the grammatical judgment test of the attrited group and the extralinguistic variables. According to Pearson's correlation, attitude showed a significant negative correlation, [$r=-.292$, $p=.040$] with the number of correct items, which was not outstandingly strong (table 3).

	AGE	LOR	FOU	ATTITUDE
Number of correct answers in attrited group	.947	.413	.113	-.292

Table 3. Correlation between the attrited group result and extralinguistic variables

Furthermore, an additional one-way ANOVA test was conducted between the spouse and the correct results. To conduct the test, I have classified the attriter group into three different categories (see Table 4):

With Russian spouse	10 participants
With Hungarian spouse	34 participants
No partner	6 participants

Table 4. Participants with/without Hungarian/Russian spouse

According to the results of the ANOVA test, the difference was not significant between groups [$F(2,47)=.886, p=.419$]. Tukey's HSD test for multiple comparisons also did not find the difference in mean between all groups.

Additional testing, including the different LOR of groups, showed no significant difference between participants below 18 and above [$r(48)=-1.128, p=.265$]. The mean difference in results was not significant either. Besides, the independent T-test based on the age at emigration ($M=26$, which makes two groups of less than 26 years and more than 26 years at the period of emigration) produced no significant difference between the groups [$r(42)=-1.025, p=.311$]. Unfortunately, education was not significant either [$r(48)=-.288, p=.775$].

8. Concluding remarks

It has been hypothesized that the attrited group will show poorer performance in the future tense formation task. The last test included the conjugation of the verb into the future tense, to test the implicit knowledge of the grammar of the participants. As expected, the control group outperformed the target group in the testing, the latter performed more heterogeneously in the given task, while the monolingual group was more homogeneous. The attrited group achieved the mean score of 7.84 out of 10, and the participants were not able to recognize their mistakes and correct them. However, the variation of the target group has not been confirmed by Pearson correlation analysis. Consequently, the relation between extralinguistic variables and correct results has not been found. The results coincide with Baladzhaeva (2013) who also could not find the direct influence of extralinguistic variables.

Hungarian influence has been observed in the grammatical choice of the future tense aspect of the verb. The simple constructions and the choice of the imperfect aspect of the verb were present in the attrited group, whereas the control group used more sophisticated constructions and the perfect aspect of the verb to create the future tense. It corresponds with the findings by Gürel (2008), who claims the complex L1 forms do not correspond with L2 forms, and thus can be processed with difficulties due to L1 attrition, especially concerning the difference between Russian grammatical forms and Hungarian ones. The tendency to replace the complex form of the future tense has been explained by the desire to simplify the structure of the future tense formation. On the other hand, simplification may be defined by the insufficient use of L1.

The level of education has not shown significance in the future tense verb aspect production. As was already mentioned, difficulties in irregular verb production have been observed among some immigrants in Hungary. However, since there was not much variation in the level of education of the participants, this relationship could not be studied. Most of the participants in the study had higher education, thus they had almost no difficulty in producing irregular verbs.

After analyzing the results of the future tense formation task, the attrition has been observed as a complex process. It corresponds with findings by Pavlenko (2003), who concluded about the drastic decrease of the grammar aspect of the verb of motion in Russian–English bilinguals. The participants proved the clear tendency to simplify the construction and use more of the imperfective constructions. However, the data is not sufficient to conclude whether one area of grammar attriters is faster than others or is immune to attrition. It is suggested to conduct more studies that would focus specifically on attrition of different areas of grammar in the Russian language and to obtain more specific data concerning this matter. In this study I did not test the language aptitude, thus I cannot conclude anything about the correlation between language aptitude and L1 attrition as it was suggested by Bylund et al. (2010). They concluded that a higher level of language aptitude can function as compensation for L1 attrition, helping to maintain higher language proficiency in the L1 with a lack of exposure (Bylund et al. 2010).

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Morfološko nazadovanje kod ruskih J1 govornika u Mađarskoj

Morfološko nazadovanje česta je tema u istraživanjima o dvojezičnosti i jezičnom nazadovanju. Brojna istraživanja potvrdila su da nazadovanje slabi gramatičku koherenciju u umu govornika i da jednojezična kontrolna skupina obično nadmašuje one ispitanike koji pokazuju znakove nazadovanja u zadacima prosudbe gramatičke prihvatljivosti. Međutim, pitanje je u kojoj mjeri izvanjezične varijable mogu opravdati tu razliku. Ovaj se rad usredotočuje na slabljenje J1 Rusa koji žive u Mađarskoj, s fokusom na prosudbu gramatičke prihvatljivosti. Svi sudionici (N = 50) proveli su više od sedam godina u Mađarskoj, a njihova dob se kreće od 22 do 72 godine. Glavni cilj istraživanja bio je istražiti stupanj utjecaja izvanjezičnih varijabli, kao što su dob, izbor jezika, kontakt i stav, učestalost upotrebe, duljina boravka, interakcija s J1 pojedinaca na njihovu gramatičku prosudbu. Osmišljen je zadatak o tvorbi budućeg vremena kako bi se dobili podaci o morfološkom nazadovanju. Rezultati bitno doprinose razumijevanju o tome kako se jezična proizvodnja osoba koje pokazuju znakove nazadovanja razlikuje od proizvodnje jednojezičnih govornika, kao i glavnih čimbenika koji doprinose jezičnom nazadovanju. Rezultati ovog istraživanja odgovaraju prethodno provedenima jer imigrantska skupina ispitanika jest podbacila u odnosu na kontrolnu. Međutim, ovo istraživanje nije uspostavilo poveznicu između izvanjezičnih varijabli i morfološkog nazadovanja u J1.

Keywords: morphological attrition, bilingualism, Russian language, Hungary

Ključne riječi: morfološko nazadovanje, dvojezičnost, ruski jezik, Mađarska

