Evaluating Language Loss Effect on Autobiographical Memory by Examining Memory Phenomenology in Bilingual Speakers

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Abstract : Graduate language loss or attrition has been well documented in individuals who migrate and become emersed in a different language environment. This phenomenon of first language (L1) attrition is an example of non-pathological (not due to trauma) and can manifest itself in frequent pauses, search for words, or grammatical errors. While the widely experienced loss of one's first language might seem harmless, there is convincing evidence from the disciplines of Developmental Psychology, Bilingual Studies, and even Psychotherapy that language plays a crucial role in the memory of self. In fact, we remember, store, and share personal memories with the help of language. Dual-Coding Theory suggests that language memory code deterioration could lead to forgetting. Yet, no one has investigated a possible connection between language loss and memory. The present study aims to address this research gap by examining a corpus of 1,495 memories of Russian-English bilinguals who are on a continuum of L1 (first language) attrition. Since phenomenological properties capture how well a memory is remembered, the following descriptors were selected - vividness, ease of recall, emotional valence, personal significance, and confidence in the event. A series of linear regression statistical analyses were run to examine the possible negative effects of L1 attrition on autobiographical memory. The results revealed that L1 attrition might compromise perceived vividness and confidence in the event, which is indicative of memory deterioration. These findings suggest the importance of heritage language maintenance in immigrant communities who might be forced to assimilate as language loss might negatively affect the memory of self.

Keywords : L1 attrition, autobiographical memory, language loss, memory phenomenology, dual coding

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