

Death of the First Language among Filipino-Germans in Negros Island

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Abstract

Nine young Filipino- Germans who spoke German as their first language migrated to the Philippines together with their aging German fathers and middle-age Filipina mothers. While staying in their new home in Negros Island, they learn English and Cebuano as they assimilate with the locals. The C-Test shows that short-term migrants still possess the proficiency of the German language as they acquire Cebuano and English while long-term migrants have attrited from their native tongue and are proficient in Cebuano and English.

Keyword: First Language Attrition

Introduction

When immigrants first attempt to adapt to their new environment, they get caught in the duality, or even multiplicity, of language. In time, their native tongues become more difficult to remember as they get more adept at using their new language/s. Many of them now struggle to think, speak, and write in their original language inasmuch as the language/s spoken in the new community is/are often very different from their native tongue. The demands of their present reality compel them to lose a part of their old selves and, usually, among those cast aside is their mother tongue.

Immigrants using more of their second and third languages at the expense of their mother tongue is the usual scenario for this study's subjects - Filipino-Germans born in Germany but have since come to the Philippines to stay; particularly, children of German fathers and Filipino mothers. As is often the case, the mother marries the much-older German national in an attempt to insure a more financially secure future for herself and her family. The couple's story usually begins through international correspondence. Once their relationship is established, the German boyfriend comes to the Philippines to marry the girlfriend usually after one or two previous visits. The young wife then goes off to live with him in Germany where she gives birth to one to two children who are raised speaking only in German (by this time, the mother is expected to be fluent in the language with Germany being a monolingual society). However, having only the retiree-husband's pension to rely on, the family eventually migrates to the Philippines where the cost of living is much cheaper. Generally, a monthly pension equivalent to Php 50,000.00 – 70,000.00 allows a family of four, with two or three extended members, to live quite a comfortable life almost anywhere in the “new country” especially outside of the big cities.

It is during migration that young immigrants’ proficiency of the first language is greatly affected. Staying in the Philippines as their new home, the Filipino-German speakers need to adjust to the linguistic demands of the community. They try hard to learn English and Cebuano to be able to communicate with people surrounding them. In the process of mastering their English and Cebuano proficiency, there is a tendency that they may slowly forget their German. Unless their parents communicate with them in their native tongue, they will not maintain their German linguistic competence. However, for those young learners whose German fathers have died, they may no longer speak German since they feel that there is no need, now that they use English frequently in their day to day encounters.

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First language attrition or forgetting the mother tongue during second-language acquisition (Selinger & Vago, 1991) is the focus of this study. When the first language is rarely used, it affects vocabulary and may have a consequence during second language immersion. Children who change their language before reaching age nine manifest “no explicit memory of their native language, nor do they show implicit benefits for processing” during adulthood (Pallier et al., 2003). These revelations indicate that first-language attrition can be parallel to the disuse of one’s native language as well as to discovering whatever passive forgetting tools support such behavior (Olshtain & Barzilay, 1991).

When young migrants move to a place and decide to stay longer where there is a small concentration of speakers of their birth language, they eventually will experience difficulty retrieving the language. Meanwhile, individuals who migrate after puberty will have a “fully” developed L1 before the onset of migration (Seliger, 1985). This means the parameters of grammar are already fixed once the L1 has been fully acquired; thus, after the speaker reaches puberty, grammar is impermeable to change (Opitz, 2004).

Table 1. Comparison of German, English and Cebuano Grammatical Structures

Grammar	German	English	Cebuano
Gender of the Language	*Grammatical Gender	*Natural Gender	* No Gender indicator (No gender distinctions are made for the third person singular: <i>he</i> and <i>she</i> are both translated in Cebuano as <i>siya</i> .)
Verb to Be	Verb to be (“sein”) used very often	Verb “to be” used very often	No verb to be
Tenses	*fewer tenses (no continuous tenses)	*More tenses are used	Fewer tenses. Passive voice used more often
Linking Verbs	*Not applicable	*For asking questions: linking verbs are used	Question marker “ba” for question without interrogatives (optional)
Inflection	*Highly inflected	*Only remnants of inflections	Uninflected, prefixes used for semantic distinctions
Infinitives & Prepositions	*Many “dangling” words used	*“Dangling” infinitives, prepositions are discouraged	Not applicable
Pronouns	*Imperative with pronoun (formal)	*Imperative without pronoun	Imperative with verb root + suffix “a”, no pronoun
*Numerals	*Numerals backward (e.g. one and twenty)	*Numerals forward (e.g. twenty one)	*Numerals forward, code switching with Spanish and English numerals
Definite Article	*Definite articles used more often (der, die, das)	*Definite articles used	1 definite article for singular, one for plural
Word Usage	* two words different usage (e.g. kennen, wissen)	*one word (e.g. know)	Two words (hibal-an, kaila)
Word Order	*Word Order Adverb + Verb + Subject (Inversion) Phrases	*Word Order Adverbs + Subject + Verb Phrases	Less rigid word order
Punctuation	*Punctuation (Commas used more often before direct object clauses)	*Punctuation (Commas are often used)	*Punctuation (commas are often used)
Nouns	* All nouns are capitalized (Van Peel, 2015)	*Only proper nouns are capitalized (Van Peel, 2015)	*Only proper nouns are capitalized (Van Peel, 2015)

As gleaned from Table 1, the three languages have different grammatical structures. For example, German employs a grammatical gender contrary to English that has natural gender. Likewise, in German, it is not the object that has a gender but the word. The car could be “der Wagen” (masc.) or “das Auto” (neutral). On the other hand, some words for individuals are neutral like “: das Kind” for the child or “das Maedchen” for the girl which is confusing for non-native speakers. In Cebuano there is no gender indicator--- no gender distinctions are made for the third person singular: *he* and *she* are both translated in Cebuano as *siya*.

In addition, the verb “sein” (to be) is used very often in German while in English the same verb is also often used. However, there is a complete absence of the verb “to be” in Cebuano. When it comes to tenses, German does not have one while tenses are important in English. For instance, German does not have a continuous tense form e.g. "erarbeitet" could be "he works" or "he is working". Likewise, it is conventional to hear sentences like *I can't come now; I eat my dinner;* or conversely, *He is riding his bike to school every day.*

Another statement to demonstrate the lack of correspondence among these three languages is the employment of the present simple in German where English makes use of ‘will’ in the future. This will lead to the mistake when someone speaks, *I tell her/him when I see her/him.* A frequent dilemma in German is selecting the proper tense to discuss about the past. Classically, spoken German uses present perfect to speak about events in the past: *Dann habe ich ein Bier getrunken.* A similar tense is applied in English which results to an error: *Then I have drunk a beer.* Cebuano on the other hand, has fewer tenses and the passive voice is used more often.

Compared to English, German has a higher inflected morphology. The four cases in German are marked by definite inflections of noun, noun phrase, pronoun, and articles, while in English there is an absence of marked distinctions between nominative, accusative, and dative in the use of articles. The structure of a German sentence, case is an integral part with word order and verb conjunction. Meanwhile, uninflected prefixes are used for semantic distinctions in Cebuano.

In asking questions, linking verbs are used in English while it is not applicable in German. Cebuano sometimes uses the question marker “ba” for questions without interrogatives. Moreover, German uses many dangling words; Cebuano totally has none; and English discourages the use of dangling infinitives as well as prepositions. Furthermore, in formal German, imperative with pronoun is used while in English, imperative without pronoun. In Cebuano, there is no pronoun but, rather, imperative with verb root + suffix is employed.

For citing numerals, German uses numerals backward such as “one and twenty” while English and Cebuano employ numerals forward. For example in English, 21 is read as “twenty one” while Cebuano employs numerals forward where code switching with Spanish and English numerals are being applied.

In addition, the German articles (determiners) comprise six definite forms depending on the case, gender, and number of the noun (*der, die, das, des, dem, den*) as well as the indefinite article (*ein, eine, einen, einem, einer, eines*). The article component of English possesses (the) one definite article and (a, an) as two indefinite articles. Cebuano on the other hand has one definite article for singular which is the word “ang” and for plural it is referred to as “ang mga”.

For the use of words, English employs one distinct word such as “know” while two words having different usage are used in German like “*kennen*” and “*wissen*”. Meanwhile, Cebuano uses two words for the meaning of “know” and these are “*hibal-an*” and “*kaila*”. In constructing the word order, German employs adverb + verb + subject (inversion) while English follows adverbs + subjects + verb. Cebuano has a less rigid word order (Van Peel, 2015).

Research Design

To know the linguistic ability of the respondents, a C-Test (Schmid, 2007) in German, English and Cebuano had been administered. The C-test scores were summed-up and the average yielded the language proficiency level of each participant in German, English, and Cebuano. A ten-point scale from the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) from the Cambridge English Language Assessment in the British Council and IDP Education Australia gauged the results of the C-Test.

Research Environment

The research focuses in Dumaguete City but some respondents live around Negros Island or in the Cebuano-speaking areas of Central Philippines. Dumaguete City, known as the City of Gentle People, is considered as a retirees’ paradise and listed in the world as one of ten best places to settle. It is truly a tourist destination with nearby beaches in the south, popular for scuba diving and snorkeling.

Respondents of the Study

This study focuses on Filipino-Germans who were born in Germany, with German as their first language but later migrated to the Philippines. Their lexical proficiency in each of their three languages: German, English, and

Cebuano—is examined in the context of their first language attrition. The short-term migrants are ASK, CSK, JRS, and RJS while long-term migrants are AMR, BMH, LOL, OMD, and RAS.

Summary of Findings

Respondents	C-Test in German	C-Test in English	C-Test in Cebuano
Short-Term Migrants	7.24	5.81	3.80
Long-Term Migrants	2.80	5.22	5.41

Table 2 Comparison of C-Test

In the C-test, the respondents were given short selected texts in which they were asked to supply the missing letters from certain words. In the German C-test, all of the more recent migrants scored well compared to the poor performance of their counterparts, whose scores indicated that their German is already well within the levels of attrition. In English both short-term and long-term migrants were near competent users of the language while Cebuano which is not taught in school but only acquired through listening and speaking, short-term migrants were limited users of the language compared to the long-term migrants who acquired the Cebuano for quite a time. These findings demonstrate that the long-term migrants have replaced the German lexicon with Cebuano and English although their better acquisition of either one or the other depended on their respective social environments.

Conclusion

This study has established that first language attrition takes place when the speakers migrate before puberty and seldom use the language. Thus, the respondents who have moved to the Philippines during their teenage years when acquisition of their first language is already completed are still able to maintain or speak in their mother tongue. In contrast, those who moved out of Germany during their childhood and speak English and Cebuano now have practically forgotten their first language.

This study further established that the longer the respondents stayed in the Philippines and the more they have assimilated with the local speakers, the more they also use their second languages, in this case English and/or Cebuano. Fluency in the second language among respondents is also determined by their non-use of their mother tongue so those who no longer use German have become more proficient in their acquired second language, which is English to most of the respondents.

Education is also an important factor in the acquisition of a language. Most of the short-term migrants attended German schools where German was taught before they migrated to the Philippines while long-term migrants had their basic education in the Philippines where English is the medium of instruction. During the early phase of immigration, the speakers are deprived of familiarity of their environment, culture, and their mother tongue. Thus, they are prompted to reorient themselves to survive. This is a complicated adaption process of learning “about the new environment, new codes of behavior, new cultural expectations.

The language barrier is one of the most difficult obstacles to be confronted, especially because of the impossibility of expressing one’s opinions, thoughts, and feelings.” Given the situation, the speakers feel frustration, defeat, and disappointment at the same time there is an indication of learning and growth in acquiring the language. Through time, some of the immigrants deny the identification of their own culture and start to assume the new roles and identities of the host culture while others hold tight to their own culture.

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