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Laméris, T.J.

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Who qualifies as ‘returnee’, and can one be truly cut off from a former societal language upon return?

Tim Joris Laméris
Leiden University

1. Introduction

In their epistemological article, Flores and Snape (2025, henceforth: the authors) explore language attrition and stabilization in the context of returnee bilingualism. They highlight that returnees are particularly crucial populations to better understand language attrition of early-acquired L2s. Returnee bilingualism can be broadly characterized into two ‘return scenarios’ that vary in the opportunities for continued exposure to the early-acquired L2 (the former societal language, or SL) after return to the homeland: (i) continued but limited exposure to the previous SL through media and/or formal instruction, as illustrated by most returnees who acquired English as an early L2 and who have continued exposure to English after return, and (ii) (near)-complete loss of exposure to the SL after return to the homeland, as illustrated for instance by Turkish–German returnees who have little to no exposure to German after return to Türkiye. As described in the authors’ comprehensive review of the returnee literature, this variation in exposure to the former SL after return, together with differences in age of return, proficiency upon return, literacy skills, but also factors like language attitude, are all key factors that predict different trajectories of L2 attrition. Indeed, as the authors point out, this multitude of individual factors, and the resulting individual attrition trajectories, are what make the study of returnees so “challenging and engaging”. One of the questions that the authors therefore sensibly raise is how research on returnees can contribute to model individual variation in language attrition. This is an important question, but beyond the observations that (a) there is indeed a wide range of outcomes of attrition in morphosyntax, phonology, and vocabulary; and that (b) these different outcomes are all likely the result of individual variation in the abovementioned key factors, in this commentary I would like to expand on this question by providing two considerations. The first is a terminological one, and concerns the scope of the term ‘returnee’ in L2 attrition

research. The second consideration concerns the very question of *how* returnees can contribute to model individual variation in language attrition. Here, I would like to raise some questions that go beyond what the authors describe in their article, and probe the very instruments that we use to operationalize individual differences in exposure and language use. In these considerations, I will primarily focus on attrition in the phonological domain.

2. When does one qualify as ‘returnee’?

The authors provide two speaker profiles that can be included in the definition of ‘returnees’, namely second and/or third-generation speakers in migration contexts, and children in dislocated families. One question that arises here is whether a third speaker profile also fits under this definition: adult L2 learners who are abroad for a certain period in an L2 immersion context, but who return to their L1 environment at some point. Whilst the L2 acquisition trajectories (and the eventual outcomes) of such adult L2 learners may be very different from the childhood/early-onset L2 learners, the L2 attritional processes after return to the homeland may be more similar. At least for phonology, the relatively rapid L1 reversal and more gradual L2 attrition found in the children/early teenager returnee studies reviewed by the authors may be similar to the language changes found in studies that examined adults who returned to their L1 environment after an L2 immersion period.

For instance, in Turner (2022), English–French sequential bilinguals who had spent six months in a French-speaking country exhibited partial reversal of their L1 English vowels 10 months after return to the UK, whereas their L2 French vowels remained relatively stable. Based on the handful of other phonetic L1 re-immersion studies, cf. Turner (2022, pp. 5–6) for an overview, one could argue that, whether the L2 was acquired early or late, the expected effect of L1 re-immersion is the same: a decrease in L2 exposure will lead to changes in the L2 which can be characterized as ‘attrition’ or ‘drift’ (De Leeuw & Chang, 2024). Crucially, the magnitude of such L2 changes is then determined by a range of individual factors, of which continued L2 exposure is perhaps the most decisive one. If continued exposure is the chief factor of interest to investigate L2 attrition after return to the L1 environment, and not the age at which the L2 was acquired *per se*, I wonder if bilinguals like the exchange students in the study by Turner (2022) could also qualify as ‘returnee’?

3. How exactly can returnee studies model individual variation in L2 attrition?

Shifting our focus to individual L2 attrition trajectories upon L1 re-immersion – regardless of whether the L2 was acquired early or late – it appears that exposure is (one of) the most important factor(s) that predict individual variation. My second consideration is a therefore a very straightforward one: how do we best measure exposure? By exposure, I here refer to an ensemble of factors including characteristics of the environment, the amount and quality of input, and the degree of language use. Exposure is typically operationalized as a single measure derived from language background questionnaires, factoring in the number of hours per language and with whom the language is used. However, recent studies, e.g., Kubota et al. (2025), show that such a measure can be broken down further into several latent experiential factors, representing for instance exposure at home; exposure at school; and exposure in the community. These latent factors may each differentially affect language maintenance, development, and attrition. Indeed, recent applications of network science, which map a language user’s social network and the languages used amongst its members, reveal insights into individual variation in bilingual proficiency that cannot be fully captured by single measures from language history questionnaires alone (Truman, 2025).

In addition, for those returnees who lose most opportunities for using the former SL in their social network upon return to the L1 environment (e.g., most returnees from a German-L2 environment) it could be interesting to probe if *any* contact with the SL persists, and to what extent this affects L2 attrition. Whilst the early studies described by the authors report a “total cut-off” from German upon return to Türkiye, one could wonder if it is actually still possible these days to be *completely* cut off from a former SL. For most teenagers across the world, average screentime amounts to several hours per day. Would it be relevant to consider incidental (online) exposure to naturalistic language as a component of L2 exposure in an L1 re-immersion context to understand individual differences in L2 attrition? Indeed, according to the *Incidental Processing Hypothesis* (Chang, 2019),¹ incidental exposure to the formerly acquired L2 (without active use of that L2) may still induce some degree of phonological activation of the L2, thereby potentially affecting L2 production.

1. Note however, that this theory was developed from a comparison of English-L2 late-onset learners of Korean in a Korean immersion setting, distinguishing between active and inactive users of the language.

Capturing exposure, and finding the best way to operationalize it, is formidably complicated challenge. But given its strong role in L2 attrition, more refined measures of exposure, such as a language user's social network, as well as measures of incidental exposure to the former SL, may provide more insights into the individual trajectories of L2 attrition in a returnee context.

4. Conclusion

I can only agree with the authors that returnee bilingualism provides a very exciting avenue for future research into L2 attrition. Especially in the phonetic domain, much more empirical work is needed to understand the longitudinal nature of individual trajectories in L2 attrition, and the role of linguistic-experiential and extralinguistic factors. Here, it will be important to simultaneously track changes in the L2 and in the L1, as phonetic changes in one language often appear to be proportional to changes in the other (Turner, 2022). Ideally, future studies will also explore L2 attrition in currently understudied and underrepresented language combinations.

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Address for correspondence

Tim Joris Laméris
Leiden University
Witte Singel 27A
Leiden, 2311 BG
The Netherlands

t.j.lameris@hum.leidenuniv.nl

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1365-3022>



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