On Nativeness and Near-nativeness:
An Analysis of the Implications of Convergence between L1 Attriters and L2 Speakers

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From the deepest of my heart, all of my gratitude goes out to my parents, Elvira and Gianfranco, without whom none of this would have ever been possible: *grazie, mamma e papà, perché da sempre mi date la possibilità di rendere realtà i miei sogni.*

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Abstract

The present work scrutinises the topic of (near-)nativeness in Applied Linguistics (AL) and Second Language Acquisition Research (SLAR). Specifically, not only is it difficult to find a one-size-fits-all definition for the native speaker from a sociolinguistic perspective (Davies 2003, 2013), but there is also enough evidence to reconsider the monolingual native speaker used as a model for comparison in SLAR, in light of the results of L1 attrition studies: Firstly, research demonstrates that the L1 system of a bilingual speaker is influenced by the advanced knowledge of an L2 (Seliger 1991; Altenberg 1991; Chamorro et al. 2016a, 2016b); secondly, some studies point to convergence between L1 attriters and very proficient L2 learners (Tsimpli et al. 2004; Sorace and Filiaci 2006; Belletti, Bennati and Sorace 2007). The very fact that the L1 system can be rendered unstable by L2 acquisition, and that there seems to be a parallelism between L1 attrition and L2 acquisition, is used as a basis for suggesting that the traditional (monolingual) native speaker does seem to be a myth in both AL and SLAR fields, and that a bilingual native speaker model should be used as an alternative benchmark for future research.

Keywords: *L1 Attrition, L2 Acquisition, Near-nativeness, Convergence, Optionality.*

Introduction

In the field of language acquisition, one of the main foci of research is how far learners can go with regards to their proficiency, both in the case of a first language (L1) and a second one (L2): Specifically, the highest level one can reach in the L1, which qualifies one as a *native* speaker of the language, and the most proficient stage of acquisition reached in the L2, what is referred to as *near-native* or *native-like* proficiency. More importantly, even if the general assumption is that the L1 system affects the L2 in the very first stages of second language acquisition (i.e. the so-called *cross-linguistic transfer*), the reverse type of phenomenon (i.e. *attrition* from the L2 to the L1) is also possible in the case of highly advanced (hence, near-native or native-like) L2 users.

Thus, the aim of the present dissertation is to explore the issues behind the definition of the native speaker model, more so in light of the results of L1 attrition studies, which seem to outline instability in the L1 system (i.e. "optionality"), along with convergence of L2 learners and L1 attriters. These results will be used a basis for the (re-)conceptualisation of a (near-)native speaker model suitable for *both* Second Language Acquisition Research (SLAR) and Applied Linguistics (AL).

The discussion will be organised as follows: Firstly, Section 1 will scrutinise the native speaker ideal (Chomsky 1965); after having highlighted the issues with the definition of such a model in AL (Davies 2003, 2013), Section 2 will introduce the topic of first language attrition (Seliger and Vago 1991), showing how the (native) L1 can be destabilised by the advanced knowledge of an L2. This section will provide a critical review of some of the most prominent SLAR studies on L1 attrition, which, for the fulfilment of this dissertation requirements, will focus on bilingual speakers with *English* as either L1 or L2, and, due to word limits, will mainly scrutinise the instance of

syntactic L1 attrition (Seliger 1991; Altenberg 1991; Chamorro et al. 2016a, 2016b; Tsimpli et al. 2004).

After having reviewed the findings of the studies on attrition, Section 3 will delve deeply into the implications of "optionality" found at the interface level of syntax with other cognitive domains in advanced L2 speakers of English, by analysing the "Interface Hypothesis" (IH) proposed by Sorace and Filiaci (2006). The possible explanations for the rise of optionality and convergence between L1 attriters and L2 near-native speakers will hence be presented (Sorace 2011, 2014, 2016). The discussion will then be drawn to a close by recapitulating why, in light of recent research on L1 attrition and L2 acquisition, the traditional monolingual model of the native speaker may not be the best point of reference in SLAR or AL, as it does not seem to be as fixed as originally thought: In fact, it should be carefully reassessed. Suggestions for further research will ultimately be provided.

1. Nativeness and Near-nativeness: Definition and Issues

This opening section addresses the issues connected to an unequivocal definition of the native speaker concept, with the aim of understanding the faultiness in a one-size-fits-all definition for such a model. However, both the theoretical and practical issues connected to the native speaker need to be outlined: The analysis of empirical evidence found in SLAR (Section 2) will highlight the inadequateness of such a fixed point of reference, as will be further discussed (Section 3).

1.1 Who is the Native Speaker?

1.1.1 The Native Speaker Ideal

So, who is the native speaker? Although much ink has been spilt to answer this question, Alan Davies' (2003: 1) thoughts, with which he begins the first chapter of his book fully dedicated to the native speaker issue, neatly sum up common sense views on such an ideal, by questioning its actual status:

> The concept of the native speaker seems clear enough, doesn't it? It is surely a common sense idea, referring to people who have a special control over a language, insider knowledge about 'their' language. They are the models we appeal to for the 'truth' about the language, they know what the language is ('Yes, you can say that') and what the language isn't ('No, that's not English, Japanese, Swahili…') … But just how special is the native speaker?

Indeed, the native speaker is important to the extent that it represents a constant point of reference for modern linguistics and language research. Such an ideal seems to have been corroborated by the views of eminent scholars throughout time: For instance, while discussing linguistic theory, Noam

Chomsky (1965: 3) says its primary concern should be "an ideal speaker-listener" who possesses the language of a specific speech-community and is not influenced in performance by factors which prove to be irrelevant for grammatical knowledge, such as "memory limitations, distractions, shifts of attention and interest, and errors (random or characteristic)". Other than being the authority to decide what can be considered grammatically correct or incorrect, as also argued by Davies above, the native speaker is the model for grammar – or, to put it in Chomsky's own words (Ibid., 24): "A grammar is … descriptively adequate to the extent that it correctly describes the intrinsic competence of the idealised native speaker". The native speaker is, thus, both the judge and the model upon which to judge: It is both "a creature of flesh and blood" and "an idealisation" (Coulmas 1981: 10).

1.1.2 Characteristics of the Native Speaker

As for the multifarious entity described above by Coulmas, different features characterise the native speaker as different from others - who, by opposition, can be defined as non-natives. Davies (2013: 3) reports the following as being traditionally typical characteristics: Firstly, native speakers acquire their L1 during childhood; secondly, they have intuitions about the acceptability and productiveness of their idiolectal grammar; thirdly, native speakers have intuitions about the standard native language grammar; fourthly, they can produce spontaneous discourse, displaying firm communicative competence; moreover, native speakers are able to write all sorts of genres and types of literature at any level, without any difficulty, and in a creative manner; lastly, they are able to interpret and translate fluently into their native language. Davies (2013: 4), however, argues that all of the points made above, apart from the first one, are debatable: In the end, the only question to ask is whether native speakerhood is defined only by the early acquisition of an L1 (Ibid.).

Such a view is shared by others such Leonard Bloomfield (1927: 151), who, years before Chomsky, talks about "the native language", by claiming that "No language is like the native language that one learned at one's mother's knee; no-one is ever perfectly sure in a language afterwards acquired". What is fundamental here is that both Chomsky (1965) and Bloomfield (1927) contribute to the understanding that, given an ideal native speaker's intuitions about his or her first (and therefore native) language, the native speaker becomes a sort of gate-keeper of the L1 (a reliable point to which one can always refer), and that other speakers who are aiming to learn an L2 can only ever aspire to be similar to such an ideal (thus, being native-like, or near-native, indeed - but *never* quite the same, as these terms seem to subtly imply).

1.2 Native, Non-native or Near-Native: Where to Draw the Line?

1.2.1 Terminology and Issues

However, as previously reported in Davies' (2013: 3) quote, there are notable issues with an unequivocal definition of the advantages that a native speaker holds over a non-native, just as there are issues with much of the terminology used to describe native speakerhood.

To begin with, as noted by Hackert (2012: 13), the first assumption usually made on the native speaker is that he or she is a monolingual. However, such a definition seems to be well outdated in the twenty-first century, where, instead, as pointed out by Davies (2003: 17), "[m]any people live in multilingual societies and we all live in multidialectal societies". Consequently, terms such as "first language" or "mother tongue" are problematic, when an individual may speak more than one language from birth (therefore, making it impossible to decide which language should be considered to be the L1), or in the case of a mother (or another parent figure, for that matter) providing bilingual or multilingual input to a child. Also, the language which serves as L1 may change over time, with another replacing it (Davies 2003: 16-17): This is of particular

interest to the present paper, as the effects of such a replacement (that is, first language attrition) will be discussed in Section 2; for now, the term "dominant language" is to be highlighted, as it denotes the possibility for change and replacement of one's L1 with another code which takes over later in one's life, as suggested by Davies (2003: 17-18).

Further complications arise in the specific case of the English language, since a clear-cut definition of an English native speaker is made even harder by at least two additional factors, as Hackert (2012: 23) reports: Firstly, with the emergence of speakers of the so-called "New Englishes" (i.e. speakers of English in India, Singapore, Pakistan, East or West Africa, who are, for the most part, bilingual second-language users), who have started to reclaim their status as "proficient if non-native users"; secondly, with the rise of English as the global lingua franca ("ELF", that is to say, as the preferred medium of communication between speakers of different L1 worldwide), which has begun to question whether the English language can still be seen as belonging only to the speakers living in places where English is the official L1, such as the United Kingdom, United States of America, Canada, Australia and New Zealand (cf. Kachru's [1992: 356] three circle model of English) by rather proposing that English now belongs to each and every individual who uses it.

It would be beyond the scope of this dissertation to explore, in depth, the issues regarding the question of ownership of the English language nowadays; it is noted, however, that such a controversy relies upon the notion of standardness (Hackert 2012: 24-25): A standard form of the language is needed, especially in today's linguistic and socio-cultural *milieu*, if English is to retain its status as (global) language, and if intelligibility amongst all of the above-mentioned groups of speakers is to be preserved. The paradox seems to lie in the fact that "… a large number of those in whose hands the care of the standard language presumably rests do not even speak standard English" (Hackert 2012: 25), and by those speakers, Hackert means *native speakers* indeed.

Ultimately, then, the differences between native and non-natives may be fewer than the ones normally imagined, since native speakers need to be taught the standard variety of the language themselves: In fact, it is possible for non-native speakers to outperform natives on proficiency tests, since these exams are about the knowledge of the standard language - which all speakers need to acquire, whether native or not (Davies 2013: 101-102). As argued by Davies (2013: 101; emphasis in the original), "[t]here are native speakers and there is *the native speaker*": This implies that the native speaker is an idealisation, a level to be reached by both natives and non-natives by being taught the standard variety. Equating the native speaker - the idealisation - directly to the Standard, is, according to Davies (Ibid.), what would bring together Applied Linguistics (AL) and Second Language Acquisition research (SLAR); yet, it is important to highlight that the variability amongst native speakers does not seem to be taken into account by SLA researchers, with "… NS [native speaker] data … viewed as the warranted baseline from which NNS [non-native speaker] data can be compared, and the benchmark from which judgments of appropriateness, markedness, and so forth, can be made" (Firth and Wagner 2007: 763).

1.2.2 From Non-Native to Near-native

Given that, on different levels, the native speaker model can be questioned, yet such model retains its status as a benchmark against which all non-natives are compared, one last interesting factor to scrutinise is what SLA researchers define as "near-nativeness" or "native-likeness" - even if it might be argued that there is no clear, unequivocal native level to equate in the first place.

SLAR usually considers near-nativeness (or native-likeness) to be attainable on the morpho-syntactical level; on the other hand, reaching native-like pronunciation (i.e. near-nativeness on a phonological level) is hard when a language is learned after puberty, as pointed out by Birdsong (2004: 93):

Indeed, "…accent serves as the primary indicator of an L2 speaker" (Bonfiglio 2010: 18).

However, being a near-native speaker is not only about knowing and performing as a native speaker at the level of morphology, syntax and phonology, hence what one could refer to as "linguistic competence"; as Davies (2003: 23) points out, near-natives are also required to know how to engage in linguistic interaction – what Hymes (1970) defines "communicative competence". Communicative competence is what makes the difference between a non-native and a native: It is harder to acquire than linguistic knowledge since, according to Davies (2003: 23), it implies knowing how to use the right kind of register, variety, tone and level of formality, at the right time. Even if difficult, it *is* possible for an adult non-native speaker to acquire both linguistic and communicative competence, thus reaching near-nativeness. The point Davies (2013: 4) makes is that psycholinguistic research, instead, shows a gap between natives and non-natives when it comes to cognition – i.e. acquiring the speed and certainty required for grammaticality judgments (cf. Sorace 2003; Hyltenstam and Abrahamsson 2003). However, Davies (2013: 5) ultimately argues that the hypothetical cognitive advantage natives seem to have over non-natives is debatable; moreover, from a socio-linguistic point of view, "[i]f a non-native speaker wishes to pass as a native speaker and is so accepted then it is surely irrelevant if s/he shows differences on more and more refined tests of grammaticality". Additionally, others similarly argue that the native speaker is a social construct, a matter of identity, attitudes and affiliations, rather than mere linguistic (and *communicative*, one could add in light of the above) competence (Hackert 2012: 30).

So far, the (socio-linguistic) issues surrounding a neat theoretical definition of the English native speaker, thus the problems concerning subsequent definitions of near-nativeness and native-likeness, have been

presented. The next section will turn to the analysis of research on L1 attrition, which points towards a convergence of L1 attriters and L2 near-native speakers; it is this convergence, indeed, that will serve as a basis for a re-consideration of the native speaker model in the third and last section of this paper, which will bring together the SLAR and AL views on the native speaker.

2. First Language Attrition and Second Language Acquisition

The following section presents the phenomenon of first language attrition, along with evidence of convergence of L1 attriters and L2 learners.

The research herein reviewed is limited to those studies in which adult bilingual speakers have *English* as either their L1 or L2: Seliger (1991), with L2 Hebrew; Altenberg (1991), with L1 German; Chamorro et al. (2016a, 2016b), with L1 Spanish; Tsimpli et al. (2004), with L1 Italian only (since the results of the L1 Greek group therein tested are not taken into consideration). Moreover, the L1 Italian speakers in Tsimpli et al. (2004) are compared with L2 near-native speakers of Italian in Sorace and Filiaci (2006) and Belletti et al. (2007), as their results seem to converge. Because of the limitations of the present overview, the following studies (among others) are recommended for a fuller account of L1 attrition in the same or different languages: for Greek, Tsimpli et al. (2004) and Tsimpli and Sorace (2006); for German, Wilson (2009) and Wilson et al. (2010); for Spanish, Montrul (2004, 2005); for Quechua-Spanish, Sánchez (2004); for Puerto Rican Spanish, Lapidus and Otheguy (2005); for Catalan, Helland (2003); for Russian, Polinsky (1995, 1997); for Turkish, Gürel (2002).

2.1 L1 Attrition: An Overview

2.1.1 Stages of Bilingualism and the Occurrence of L1 Attrition

The learning of a second language is a complex process which develops gradually in the mind of an individual. Specifically, the two languages in the mind of the bilingual[1] are said to "coexist", both drawing from a limited quantity of memory and processing space (Seliger and Vago 1991: 4).

At the very beginning of the L2 acquisition process, learners rely on the already established L1 system when they make hypotheses about the target L2:

[1] In this discussion, the term "bilingual" refers to an individual who has learned a second language *after* puberty, unless otherwise stated.

Cross-linguistic "transfer" from the L1 to the L2, then, is what research normally refers to when explaining errors in the target language which seem to stem directly from the L1 system of the bilingual learners (Weinreich 1953: 7). However, as Seliger and Vago (1991: 5) point out, there are some errors which are produced by many learners, regardless of their individual L1, which are thought to be linked to Universal Grammar (UG) principles. This first stage of bilingualism is what Seliger and Vago (1991: 4-5) name "compound I bilingualism".

The second stage in the process of L2 learning takes place in the mind of the learner when (1) he or she begins to restructure the L1 hypotheses to L2 data, but also when (2) the learner starts to (re-)create new rules for the L2 system, without drawing from those of the L1 (cf. the "restructuring" and "recreation" processes in Corder 1978). This stage is described as "coordinate bilingualism" because, according to Seliger and Vago (1991: 5) the L1 and L2 have started developing independently, although there is still room for transfer from the L1 to the L2 and for universal principles.

The third and last stage in bilingualism, what Seliger and Vago (1991: 5-6) name "compound II bilingualism", is where L1 attrition effects start to show: Indeed, the grammars of the two languages seem to intertwine again, just as in the very first stage of bilingualism, where L1 to L2 transfer took place. However, since the learner has now begun to master the L2, the opposite type of transfer starts to take place - that is, from the L2 to the L1. Furthermore, an important point needs to be made: Attrition is not to be confused with "code mixing" or "code switching", both of which can be controlled by the bilingual speaker, and predicted on the basis of stimuli variation, such as change of topic or interlocutor (Seliger and Vago 1991: 6). Figure 1 below sums up the changing relationship between the L1 and L2 grammar in the mind of a bilingual learner, along with the role of UG in the different stages of bilingualism.

Compound I bilingualism	*Coordinate bilingualism*	*Compound II bilingualism*
L1 → L2	L1 → L2	L2 → L1
UG → L2	L2 → L2	L2 → L2
	UG → L2	L1 → L2
		UG → L2?
		UG → L1

Figure 1. The three stages of bilingualism (Seliger and Vago 1991: 5).

2.1.2 Instances of L1 Attrition Explained

Attrition shows on different levels of the L1: The lexicon, specifically, can be affected by attrition soon after the L2 learning process has begun (Linck et al. 2009; Olshtain and Barzilay 1991). However, the question to ask is whether attrition modifies actual L1 knowledge, or whether there is a change in how a subject has access to it. If a bilingual subject is shown to maintain intact L1 intuitions (for example, when administered an acceptability judgment task), and produces standard forms and structures (in the right environments with the same semantic intentions) at times, then it is plausible to conclude that "… neither the syntactic properties of the forms concerned nor their pragmatic properties [have]… been lost in any way, *only the facility with which they were manipulated on-line*" (Sharwood and Van Buren 1991: 18; emphasis added).

Indeed, even if attrition is, by some, described as "… the gradual loss of a language by an individual" (Schmid 2002: 7), it can also be seen as a *selective* change, as some of the most prominent literature on syntactic attrition shows: Some structures are more prone to L1 attrition because they involve the integration and coordination of external conditions, with attrition effects being more visible in tests which rely on on-line processing.

2.2 L1 Attrition in the Syntactic Domain: Main Findings

2.2.1 L1 Attrition: Transfer from the L2 to the L1

In the first study here in analysis, that is Seliger (1991), English is the language which is affected by attrition from L2 Hebrew: O., the bilingual subject from

whom data was collected, immigrated to Israel at the age of six, speaking no Hebrew, with English as her L1. In order to facilitate L2 learning, her family later adopted Hebrew as home language. Seliger's (1991) is a case-study which lasted for two years, gathering data from O. both when she was eight years old and when she was nine years old; in the USA, a control group which consisted of eight monolinguals, ranging from six to nine years, was tested.

Attrition effects from Hebrew to English were found in the responses given by O. on an acceptability test of dative sentences. Specifically, the participant accepted ungrammatical sentences as grammatical (9 sentences accepted out of 11 for word order and preposition judgments, and 4 out of 5 for double object judgments) far more than she rejected them (1 out of 10 and 2 out of 6, respectively, for the same categories). Basically, O., contrary to most of the control group, accepted sentences where the PP followed the verb directly, which are normally ungrammatical in English, and also accepted sentences where the object ignored the condition of being capable of being possessed by the indirect object, such as in (1) and (2), respectively, below:

(1) *Dick handed to Sally the book.

(2) *David made Susan the choice.

As for the wrong word order judgments, Seliger (1991: 236-237) explained the findings in his data by stating that O. accepted sentences where PPs appear directly after the verb as a consequence of indirect positive internal transfer from Hebrew. That is to say, the participant established an equivalency relationship between the grammar of the two languages when she had no or limited access to the actual grammar of the language she was trying to recover. In other words, since O. was not able to tell whether PPs could be placed after verbs, drawing from English, she drew instead from Hebrew – where that syntactic placement is indeed possible. This resulted in what Seliger named

"Stage III. Final stage: Redundancy reduction and attrition": A collapse of the rules for dative in the two language systems, as Figure 2 below shows.

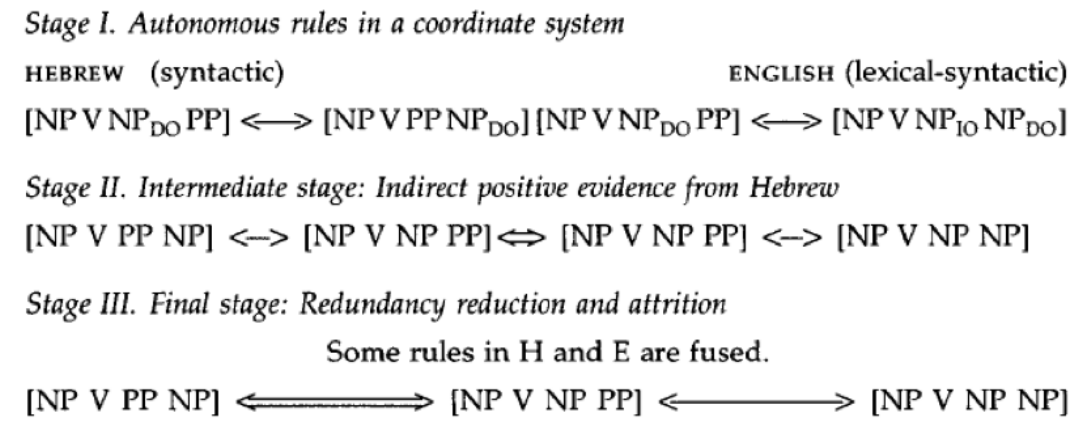

Figure 2. Redundancy reduction for the dative in attrition (Seliger 1991: 237).

The conclusion reached by Seliger (1991: 239) is that L1 attrition and L1 acquisition seem to be alike, in that both processes imply an adjusting of rules. If, in L1 acquisition, the adjusting stems from positive evidence from the L1, in L1 attrition, instead, the unlearning derives from "indirect positive evidence" from the L2 to the L1.

In the second study herein analysed, that is Altenberg (1991), English was instead the (L2) language from which attrition effects showed on the L1 of the participants (i.e., German). For the study, Altenberg analysed a married couple, both native speakers of German, who had been living in the USA for more than forty years; since they had not been part of a German language community, Altenberg expected that they would show L1 attrition. Specifically, the researcher wanted to find out which aspects attrition would affect the most. The couple was administered three different tasks – and, because of the focus of the present paper, only the results in the syntax task will be analysed. The participants were asked to rate (from 1 – completely unacceptable – to 5 – completely acceptable) four types of German sentences and four types of English sentences, respectively: Sentences with the same

word order in German and English (EG); sentences with a grammatical word order in English, but not in German (E*G), and vice-versa (*EG); sentences which were ungrammatical in both English and German (*E*G) – but grammatical according to Spanish word order, so that these structures would still be linguistically plausible. Two English monolinguals judged the grammaticality of the English sentences, whereas the German sentences were rated according to the literature. The results are reported in Figure 3.

	EG	E*G	*EG	*E*G
Bilingual subjects				
German				
Subject A	1.06	2.57	1.10	2.88
Subject B	1.00	3.24	1.10	4.12
English				
Subject A	1.26	1.11	2.37	3.06
Subject B	1.06	1.26	3.42	4.51
Monolingual subjects				
English				
Subject C	1.40	1.53	4.67	4.91
Subject D	1.34	1.49	4.67	4.30

Figure 3. Average responses in the syntax task (Altenberg 1991: 195).

As pointed out by Altenberg (1991: 196), the participants' knowledge of L1 grammatical forms was uninfluenced by English ungrammaticality, as can be seen by comparing EG and *EG scores; on the other hand, the influence of English can be inferred when comparing the scores for E*G sentences with the *E*G ones (since the former were rated slightly better than the latter). Similarly, influence from German to English can be seen by comparing the scores of *EG structures with the *E*G ones (again, the first being rated slightly better than the last).

This being said, since subject A rated a sentence as (3) below as acceptable (which would normally be ungrammatical in German, since the word *Mädchen* needs to be preceded by the article in dative case – *dem* – and

not in nominative – *das*) along with (4) (usually considered somewhat acceptable), Altenberg (1991:197) suggests "… either that case information in general … or that surface grammatical relations are vulnerable to attrition".

(3) **Das Mädchen wurde ein Buch gegeben.*
The girl-NOM was a book given
'The girl was given a book.'

(4) ?**Wilhelm sah den König und dankte dem König.*
'William saw the king and thanked the king.'

In the end, however, Altenberg (1991: 197) questions whether E*G structures show attrition effects from L2 English, or whether they are only an example of simplification. Further studies could explore such a question by employing sentence judgment tasks, along with appropriate control groups.

2.2.2 The Reversal of Attrition Effects and Selectivity in L1 Attrition

The studies reviewed so far seem to show that attrition is triggered by prolonged L2 exposure, along with a reduction in L1 input. More recent research, instead, has begun to look in the opposite direction: That is to say, what happens when L1 attriters are re-exposed to their L1 after periods of extensive L2 exposure.

Specifically, Chamorro et al. (2016a) investigated whether re-exposure to L1 Spanish would revert the attrition effects from L2 English in a group of 24 Spanish-English bilinguals, who had been living in the UK for at least five years, but had spent a week in Spain before being tested. The re-exposed participants, along with 24 Spanish-English bilinguals (the attriters) and 24 Spanish monolinguals (the control group), were asked to perform a naturalness judgment task, and a reading task while being eye-tracked. The participants needed to rate the naturalness of the sentences they read, which had been

modified to account for Carminati's (2002: 33) PAS (Position of Antecedent Strategy, proposed for Italian intra-sentential anaphora), according to which a null pronoun prefers an antecedent in the SpecIP position (i.e. the subject) and an overt pronoun prefers an antecedent not in the SpecIP position (i.e. the object), such as in (5) below:

(5) Quando Mario$_i$ ha telefonato a Giovanni$_j$, *pro*$_i$/*lui*$_j$ aveva appena finito di mangiare.
'When Mario has telephoned Giovanni, (he) had just finished eating.'

Chamorro et al. (2016a: 17-18) manipulated the grammatical number of the antecedent so that the pronoun could refer to the subject or the object antecedent only. There were four types of sentences: Half of them had a singular subject and a plural object, and half of them had a plural subject and a singular object (see Appendix A). The predictions were that attriters would take longer to resolve pronoun antecedents (which the eye-tracking data would show), whereas their underlying preference would be shown in the judgment task, since the limited amount of time in the eye-tracking task might have hidden such preferences.

In the results, Chamorro et al. (2016a) found no significant difference among the three groups, which perceived null pronouns as more natural, and, following Carminati's (2002) PAS, preferred subject antecedents for null pronouns. The results for the eye-tracking task are shown in Figures 3, 4 and 5 below – including "first-pass reading times" (i.e. the full length of all fixations in a region, without any regression or return), "go-past times" (i.e. all fixations in a region, with regressions and/or returns) and total times in the critical region (i.e. ella/*pro* cruzaba – she/*pro* crossed). It is clear that all groups took longer to resolve sentences with overt pronouns than those with null pronouns. Furthermore, pronoun mismatch was noticed more by the monolingual group

and the exposed, with no significant differences being found between these two, or between exposed speakers and attriters.

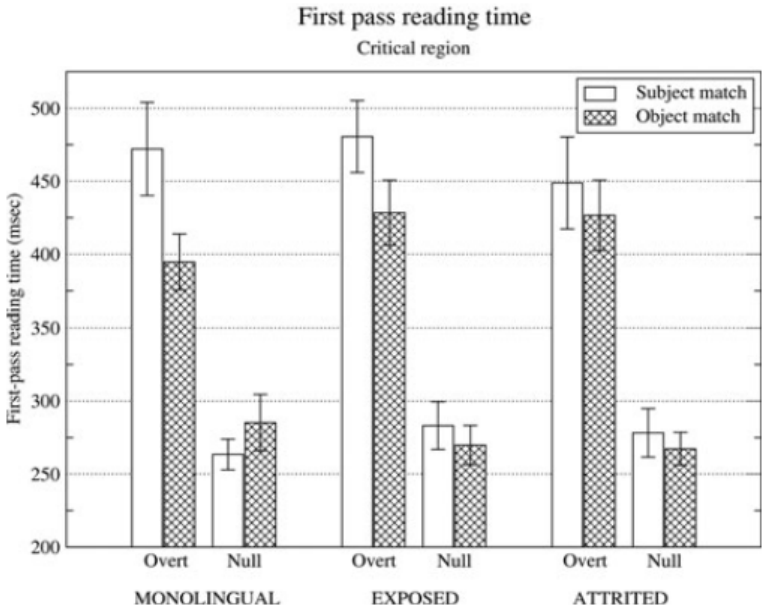

Figure 4. First-pass RT in the critical region (Chamorro et al. 2016a: 529).

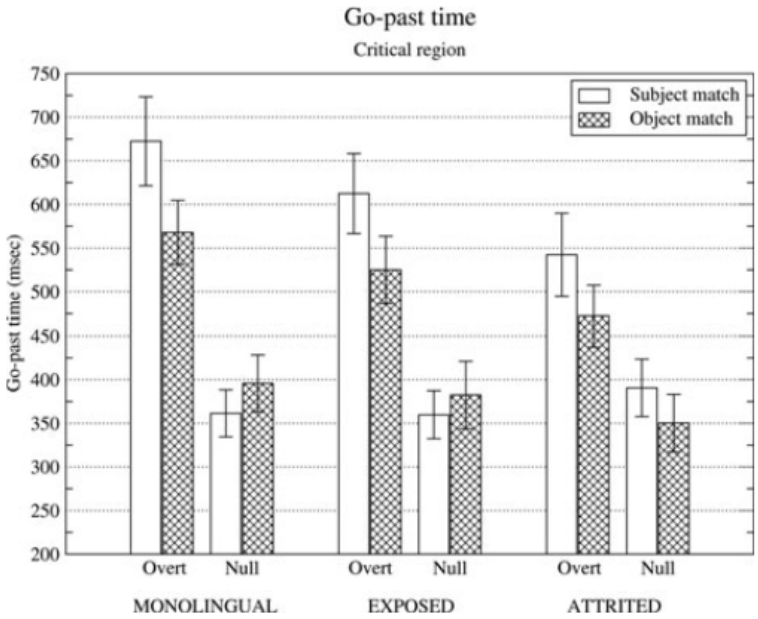

Figure 5. Go-past RT in the critical region (Ibid.).

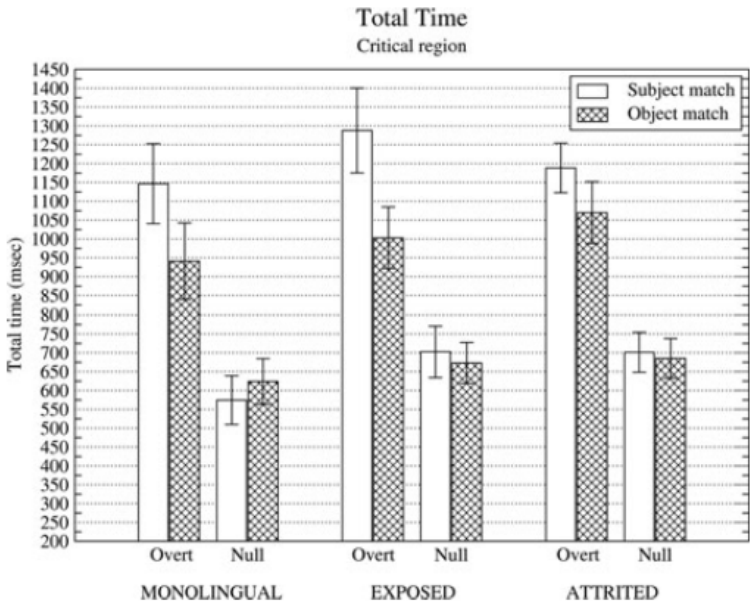

Figure 6. Total-time RT in the critical region (Ibid.).

On the basis of these results, Chamorro et al. (2016a: 530-531) concluded that L1 re-exposure for attriters seem to result in a reduction of attrition effects; however, the fact that the exposed group set itself between monolinguals and attriters (with monolinguals showing significant differences from attriters, unlike exposed from monolinguals or from attriters) means that only further research can tell whether reversion to a monolingual system is fully possible once attrition has started to take place.

It is important to note that a second study by Chamorro et al. (2016b) tested the same three groups of speakers for the effects of L1 attrition and L1 re-exposure, with the same types of tasks, on different kinds of sentences – specifically, sentences containing Differential Object Marking (DOM). DOM, as Chamorro et al. (2016b: 7-9) explain, is a phenomenon present in Spanish and some other languages (but not in English) by which animate and specific objects must be introduced by a dative preposition - *a* ("to") in Spanish, such as in (6a) below (where *al* is the contraction of *a* and the masculine singular definite article *el*) – or else the absence of a dative preposition will result in an ungrammatical sentence, as in (6b):

(6) a. María vio al niño esta mañana.

María saw to+the kid this morning

b. *María vio el niño esta mañana.

María saw the kid this morning

Again, four kinds of sentences were administered – those with animate objects introduced correctly by the personal preposition, or introduced incorrectly without one, and with inanimate objects introduced correctly without the preposition, or incorrectly by one (see Appendix B).

The off-line results showed equal sensitivity across all groups in terms of DOM violations, and early sensitivity to DOM violations was revealed in the eye-tracking results for all groups as well. The reversal of attrition effects could not be tested, since no attrition effects were found in the first place. Chamorro et al. (2016b: 26-30) concluded that DOM does not undergo attrition in the L1 (as opposed to anaphora resolution, cf. their previous study) because such a structure is situated at the interface between syntax and semantics, rather than syntax and pragmatics (following the Interface Hypothesis, as later explained in 3.1.1): Both studies by Chamorro et al. (2016a, 2016b) thus outline *selectivity*, revealing that not all structures are equally affected by attrition.

2.2.3 Evidence of Convergence of L1 Attriters and L2 Speakers

The last study on L1 attrition herein reviewed is Tsimpli et al.'s (2004) - which is of special interest to the present discussion, considering that in two studies of L2 acquisition, as well, similar results were found by Sorace and Filiaci (2006) and Belletti, Bennati and Sorace (2007).

Indeed, a Picture Verification Task (PVT) administered to a group of twenty Italian near-native speakers of English by Tsimpli et al. revealed an over-extension of the scope of overt subject pronouns. The group of near-

natives, as shown in Figures 7 and 8 below, differed significantly from their monolingual counterparts when resolving overt pronouns in situations of possible forward and backward anaphora.

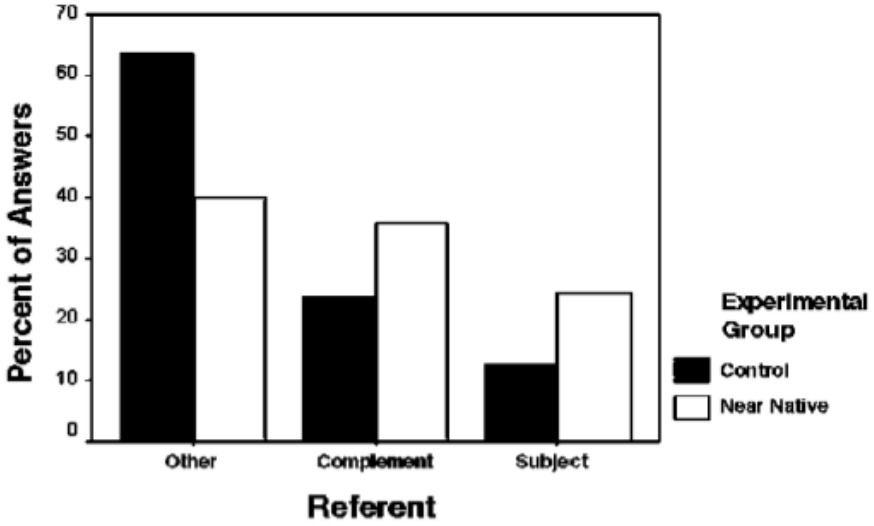

Figure 7. PVT: Forward Anaphora, Overt Pronoun (Tsimpli et al. 2004: 270).

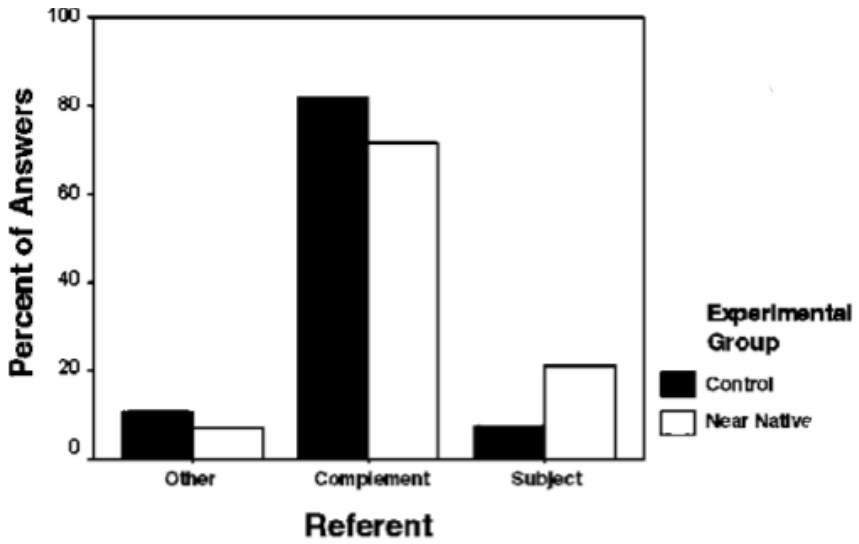

Figure 8. PVT: Backward Anaphora, Overt Pronoun (Tsimpli et al. 2004: 271).

Specifically, in sentences as (7) below, Italian near-natives did not show strong preferences for any choice, as opposed to monolinguals who strongly preferred the interpretation of a "new" referent:

(7) *Quando lei attraversa la strada, l'anziana signora saluta la ragazza.*
when she crosses the street the old woman greets the girl
'When she is crossing the street, the old woman greets the girl.'

Furthermore, in sentences such as (8) below, even if both groups similarly preferred the complement to be the referent of the pronoun, there was a significant difference between near-natives and monolinguals (8% as opposed to 21%) when choosing the subject as referent for the same sentence:

(8) *L'anziana signora saluta la ragazza quando lei attraversa la strada.*
the old woman greets the girl when she crosses the street
'The old woman greets the girl when she is crossing the street.'

Tsimpli et al. (2004: 273- 274) explained that, as predicted, the interpretation of overt pronouns in Italian is significantly influenced by attrition from English, as shown by the tendency of near-native speakers of English (i.e. *Italian attriters*) to interpret the overt pronouns as a continued topic.

Interestingly enough, two more studies yielded similar results: In both Sorace and Filiaci (2006), and Belletti, Bennati and Sorace (2007), the overextension of overt pronouns was attested, even to a greater extent, in *near-native speakers of Italian*, who would produce and accept these pronouns in sentences such as (9b), when monolinguals would normally produce (9c):

(9) a. Perché Giovanna non è venuta?
'Why didn't Giovanna come?'
b. Perché **lei** non ha trovato un taxi.
c. Perché __ non ha trovato un taxi.
'Because she couldn't find a taxi.'

On the other hand, all of the studies (i.e. Tsimpli et al. 2004; Sorace and Filiaci 2006; Belletti, Bennati and Sorace 2007) showed that null subject pronouns were *not* misunderstood or misused by either Italian attriters from English or English near-native speakers of Italian.

All in all, the studies reviewed in this section all point towards the *instability* of the L1 system. Such instability not only seems to be a consequence of the advanced command of an L2, but also appears to be open to changes according to length of (re-)exposure to the L1 - although the extent to which attrition reversal is possible is not yet fully known. Last, but certainly not least, there seems to be a convergence between L1 speakers experiencing attrition and highly advanced L2 learners. The next section will thus present possible explanations for L1 instability and convergence of L1 attriters and L2 speakers, along with the consequences thereof on the native speaker model.

3. Nativeness and Near-nativeness in Light of Convergence

This third and final section brings the discussion on nativeness and near-nativeness to a close through (1) an explanation for the convergence between L1 attriters and L2 speakers, following Sorace and Filiaci's (2006) Interface Hypothesis (IH), and (2) the consequential re-consideration of the traditional native (and near-native) speaker model, on a conceptual and practical level in both SLAR and AL. Suggestions for future research are ultimately provided.

3.1 System Instability: The Interface Hypothesis and Optionality

3.1.1 The Interface Hypothesis (IH): Optionality at the Interface Level

The convergence between L1 attriters and L2 near-natives, specifically in the case of overt pronoun overextension (Tsimpli et al. 2004; Sorace and Filiaci 2006; Belletti, Bennati and Sorace 2007), highlights "optionality" in both L1 attriters and L2 near-native speakers.

In the beginning, Sorace and Filiaci (2006) explained optionality through their "Interface Hypothesis" (IH). In its original version, the IH assumed indeterminacy in the acquisition of structures situated at the interface of syntax and other cognitive domains; that is to say, the coordination of knowledge of such structures is an ability later (if ever) acquired by the L2 learner (Sorace 2005: 69). This does not mean that syntactic and pragmatic conditions cannot be acquired, but only that "…the integration of syntactic and pragmatic conditions remains less than optimally efficient and gives rise to optionality" (Sorace 2011: 26). Specifically, there is "residual optionality" in L2 acquisition, "emerging optionality" in L1 attrition, and "protracted indeterminacy" in bilingual L1 acquisition (Ibid.: 9).

Furthermore, interfaces are distinguished between "internal" and "external"(Tsimpli and Sorace 2006), highlighting that the syntax-discourse interface, which integrates properties of language and pragmatic processing, is

more likely to show attrition effects than an interface such as the syntax-semantics one, which instead involves only formal properties of the language system. This explains why L1 attrition was found in the study by Chamorro et al. (2016a), which investigated anaphora resolution (at the syntax-pragmatics interface), but not in Chamorro et al. (2016b), which looked at sentences containing DOM (at the syntax-semantics interface); cf. Section 2.2.2.

What further needs to be addressed is whether the optionality found in L2 near-native speakers and L1 attriters results from changes in the individual's syntactic knowledge, or stems from the integration and processing of different types of knowledge found in different domains (Sorace 2005: 70). A processing resources account, for instance, drawing from research on language, cognition, and psychology, scrutinises how bilinguals, differently from monolinguals, access interface structures in real time - rather than finding the main source of optionality in cross-linguistic transfer (Sorace 2011: 19). In brief, since cognitive psychology shows that both languages are active simultaneously in the mind of a bilingual speaker (see Green 1998), bilinguals constantly need to control for both languages in order to avoid interferences (i.e. "executive control"); this constant need to keep the two languages apart (i.e. the "inhibition" of one language or the other), could result in less attentional resources available for other tasks (such as linguistic ones). In this sense, if anaphoric dependencies are resolved by drawing from the same resources as language inhibition, then the optionality found to a greater extent in the near-native speakers of Italian in Sorace and Filiaci (2006) and Belletti, Bennati and Sorace (2007), as opposed to the L1 attriters in Tsimpli et al. (2004), could be explained by saying that L2 near-natives are more likely to overextend overt pronouns, since it is more costly for them to inhibit their dominant L1 (English), rather than for L1 attriters to inhibit their secondary L2; for a thorough discussion on resource allocation, cognitive load, and inhibitory control, see Sorace (2011, 2014, 2016).

To fully understand what goes on inside the bilingual mind, bridges across different fields of research (traditionally kept separate) definitely seem to be needed.

3.1.2 Parallels between L1 and L2 Optionality

From the former discussion, optionality could be seen as the direct consequence of reaching a high level of competence in an L2.

However, it needs to be reminded once again that optionality is not only found in L2 near-natives, but also in L1 attriters, even if to a lesser extent. Sorace (2005: 74) argues that there is a *fil rouge* joining together L2 near-natives and L1 attriters (thus, emerging L1 optionality and residual L2 optionality): Firstly, both groups of speakers share a reduction of exposure to the language, when compared to the amount of input monolinguals get in the same language (with L2 speakers only learning their L2 from adulthood, and L1 attriters not being exposed to their L1 constantly anymore); secondly, both L2 near-natives and L1 attriters experience a variation of quality of input, when compared to the input they would instead receive in a (predominantly) monolingual environment (with L2 speakers using, perhaps, their second language with other L2 speakers or with L1 speakers under attrition, and L1 attriters using their first language with other L1 attriters or L2 speakers, thus resulting in optionality in input itself).

Consequently, changes in quantity and quality of input, too, may be seen as a cause for the decline of processing abilities, since they result in less opportunities to coordinate information from different domains (Sorace 2014: 377). The conclusion reached by Sorace (2003: 145; emphasis in the original) is that "… *all* grammars, native or non-native, need continued exposure to *robust* input in order to be not only acquired, but also maintained".

3.2 Rethinking Nativeness and Near-nativeness

3.2.1 The (Near-)Native Speaker: Myth or Reality?

In light of the research reviewed thus far, the native speaker model (along with that of the near-native speaker) can be revised. Drawing from the title of the volume by Davies (2003) - *The Native Speaker: Myth and Reality* – the question of whether the (near-)native speaker is more of a myth or a reality is now addressed, with different points explained.

Firstly, the implications of L1 attrition need to be considered. As outlined in Section 1, the native speaker is a firm point of reference against which non-natives are usually judged: This, logically, would require the L1 system of the native speakers to be stable. As argued extensively in Sections 2 and 3, instead, the advanced knowledge of an L2 and the reduction of L1 input significantly affect the way L1 knowledge is processed or coordinated by a bilingual: Highly competent (or near-native) L2 speakers, thus, might not seem to behave entirely native-like with regards to their L1. Although it is true that, normally, the native speaker against which non-natives are compared, in SLAR, is a *monolingual* L1 speaker, monolingual speakers are increasingly hard to find nowadays, as we all live in multilingual, or at least multidialectal societies, and, with specific reference to the English language, the task of assigning native or non-native status seems to be based more on sociocultural matters, rather than being defined linguistically (cf. Section 1.2.1). The native speaker, thus, does seem to be much of an idealisation: It is a level that can only be aspired by other speakers, without ever being reached, as there is no universal agreement as to who or what a native speaker is.

Consequently, who a *near*-native speaker is, too, can hardly be defined: Even if SLA researchers employ different methods to screen for near-nativeness (cf. White and Genesee 1996, also re-adapted in Tsimpli et al. 2004), these could be said to include bias from the start, when supposedly *native speaker* judges (i.e. usually speakers from a country where English is the L1) are asked to rate

non-natives' proficiency in morphology, syntax, vocabulary, *fluency and pronunciation*. Specifically, the bias is in the fiction that native speakers will converge on a single model in their judgments, regardless of the multitude of L1 varieties of English; the bias also lies in the fact that a (supposedly) "native-like" accent is notably difficult to acquire when the L2 is learned after puberty, as in the case of the individuals being tested in research on adult bilingualism; since accent gives away the native or non-native provenience of an individual immediately (cf. Section 1.2.2), at least most of the times, the judgments on other levels of linguistic competence, too, might be influenced (both in a positive and negative way, it could be argued, since the native-like accent of an L2 speaker might result in just as much bias as that towards a non-native).

Last but not least, an important point needs to be made. Davies (2013: 156-157) ends his discussion on the native speaker ideal in Applied Linguistics (AL) by stating that the views in AL and SLAR cannot be compared as they look at the native speaker from two opposite sides: The cognitive one, as for SLAR, and the sociolinguistic one, in the case of AL. As for the latter, Davies (2013: 157) claims as follows:

> It does appear that the claim for the special status of the real, as opposed to the mythical, native speaker applies only to a small NS élite and takes no account of the huge variability[2] among native speakers in terms of life experience, ability and literacy skills.

However, it needs to be pointed out that the present dissertation has tried to prove that both views can *de facto* be reconciled, the moment one accepts that the *monolingual* native speaker, the model *par excellence*, is not a reality, but rather a construct defined on the basis of plausibly biased socio-linguistic and

[2] With English varieties not being taken into account either, it could be added.

personal matters: The "gulf" separating natives from non-natives can thus be seen more as a "continuum" (Davies 2013: 101), as supported by evidence in adult SLAR *as well* (contrary to what Davies claims) on the basis of convergence of a more concrete type of native speaker (i.e. the L1 attriter) and the non-native speaker (i.e. the highly advanced L2 learner).

Ultimately, the monolingual native speaker can be said to be a myth; the bilingual (near-)native speaker is, instead, reality, in both SLAR and AL.

3.2.2 Suggestions for Further Research

Finally, it seems reasonable to suggest a few possible paths for future research.

In the first place, in order to further scrutinise the differences and similarities between native and non-native speakers (of English, in particular, but not only), research needs to start taking into account the great amount of individual variability which underlies the subjects under scrutiny - for instance, by controlling the levels of exposure, input and use of different L2s (L3s, and so on) but also of different varieties/ dialects of the same language.

Secondly, in the case of research addressing near-native speakers, screening procedures should seek to eliminate accent bias, as this might influence a fair assessment of overall language proficiency – perhaps, by completely excluding judgments on accent native-likeness from near-nativeness screening tests (unless, of course, accents are the focus of research).

Lastly, with the wider aim of understanding "the forest" of a wider model of bilingualism, past individual "trees" of bilingual individuals (Sorace 2011: 27), more research into optionality in L1 attrition and L2 acquisition is needed: Abandoning the controversial monolingual (native) speaker (untenable because of the incompatibility, as argued so far, of it being both monolingual and native), and replacing it with a bilingual (near-)native with which other bilinguals can be compared, seems like a suitable path to follow.

Conclusion

All in all, the present dissertation has analysed the issues with the traditional model of (near-)native speaker, and considered a re-conceptualisation thereof, in both AL and SLAR.

In the first section, it has been argued that a one-size-fits-all definition for the native speaker is unlikely to be successful, since many of the features thought to be characteristic of the native speaker are actually debatable, especially in the case of the English native speaker, who, with the emergence of World Englishes and the use of English as a global lingua franca, is even harder to define, from a sociolinguistic point of view.

In the second section, a review of studies on syntactic L1 attrition (to and from English) has pointed towards the instability of the L1 system, and convergence between L1 attriters and L2 learners - as both groups of speakers display a similar degree of optionality in the processing of structures found between syntax and other cognitive domains.

In the third and last section, the discussion on the (near-)native speaker has been drawn to an end, by outlining how in both AL and SLAR the fixed monolingual native speaker is more of an idealised concept, rather than a concrete reality. In order to set a better benchmark against which comparisons could be made, researchers should probably focus on individual variability; along with a more accurate native speaker model, a way of screening for unbiased near-nativeness should be the aim of future research.

In the end, the views on the native speaker, from both AL and SLAR perspectives, seem to be possibly reconciled in another model. Given that monolingualism is no longer the norm, and that advanced bilingualism seems to be correlated to flexibility in both L1 and L2 systems, it is unfruitful to hold on to an out-of-date, equivocal, blurred model. The traditional monolingual native speaker could be replaced with a bilingual speaker, who is "…not, and

should not be expected to be, like monolinguals in either of [his or her] languages" (Sorace 2016: 11); other speakers could then be compared with this bilingual native speaker model, in order to seek a more thorough understanding in the study of language.

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Appendix

A. Chamorro et al.'s (2016a: 17-18) four types of sentences

Condition 1: **Overt/subject match**

La madre saludó a las chicas cuando ella cruzaba una calle con mucho tráfico.
The mother greeted-SG to the girls when she crossed-SG a street with a lot of traffic.

Condition 2: **Overt/object match**

Las madres saludaron a la chica cuando ella cruzaba una calle con mucho tráfico.
The mothers greeted-PL to the girl when she crossed-SG (…).

Condition 3: **Null/subject match**

La madre saludó a las chicas cuando *pro* cruzaba una calle con mucho tráfico.
The mother greeted-SG to the girls when *pro* crossed-SG (…).

Condition 4: **?Null/object match**

Las madres saludaron a la chica cuando *pro* cruzaba una calle con mucho tráfico.
The mothers greeted-PL to the girl when pro crossed-SG (…).
'The mother/s greeted the girl/s when (she) crossed a street with a lot of traffic.'

B. Chamorro et al.'s (2016b: 14-15) four types of sentences

Condition 1: ***Animate/el**

*Juan defendió el conductor que fue despedido.

'Juan defended the driver that was fired.'

Condition 2: **Animate/al**

Juan defendió al conductor que fue despedido.

'Juan defended to the driver that was fired.'

Condition 3: **Inanimate/el**

Juan defendió el argumento de forma efusiva.

'Juan defended the argument in an effusive way.'

Condition 4: ***Inanimate/al**

*Juan defendió al argumento de forma efusiva.

'Juan defended to the argument in an effusive way.'