**ERP evidence for attrition in L1 lexicon and morpho-syntax**

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This paper gives an overview of the first large-scale event-related brain potential (ERP) studies on L1 attrition and discusses their implications for our understanding of the bilingual brain. First, we will present ERP data that extend attriters’ own reports of lexical problems in their L1 and illustrate how similar words are confused as a function of language dominance and proficiency [1,2]. Next, we will address the highly controversial question of whether L1 morpho-syntax may be subject to attrition in adult migrants. One previous ERP study on grammatical gender failed to find clear ERP differences between German migrants and monolinguals and concluded that morpho-syntax in general may not be subject to L1 attrition effects [3]. However, our own work testing a range of grammatical structures in Italian immigrants in Montreal clearly shows that they processed Italian sentences differently than monolinguals, especially when English had become their dominant language [4-6]. Strikingly, L2-dominant attriters were found to perceive a grammatical sentence in their L1 as ungrammatical, if it violated the L2 grammar [5]. As a whole, the ERP data available provide initial physiological evidence that L1 attrition in adult migrants’ brains occurs at both lexical and morpho-syntactic levels of processing, modulated by the degree of exposure to the two languages. Together with other evidence from late L2 learners [7], the data suggest that the adult brain remains plastic for both L2 and L1. Where ERP data patterns seem inconsistent across studies from different labs, we discuss potential underlying reasons [6,8].

We will also briefly touch upon how L1 attrition may positively influence one’s L2, due to greater L1 inhibition and therefore less interference.
References


