Topic 15
FIRST LANGUAGE: FORGOTTEN, LOST and FOUND

Many young adults who no longer use their first language (hereafter L1), the one they spoke in their early years, often feel a sense of loss, regret, shame, and even guilt. They often recall how, as children, they embraced a new language, in most cases the language of the school, (hereafter L2), gained social acceptance and in the process lost their L1. While some report that they have ***forgotten*** their L1, others say that they have ***lost*** it. Most share a ***longing*** to speak it again, to reconnect with family in their country of origin and reclaim the culture that once defined their lives. To better understand personal[1] language disruption and shift we address **SIX** questions:

1 *What is the difference between L1 forgetting and L1 loss?*

L1 forgetting and subsequent loss are two subtractive language processes found in newcomer children and also in adults who gradually stopped using their L1 and became L2 dominant. **L1 forgetting** happens first. Faced with a new L2 (in most cases the majority or the school language), speakers begin adding it to their language repertoire. As they make progress, they begin their bilingual journey: they continue to use their L1 and make progress in L2. Over time, L1 exposure and use decrease, L2 becomes the preferred language, key L1 vocabulary and grammar are weakened and speaking becomes difficult. As L1 declines, it shifts from being dominant to weak. L2 takes over and L1 loss, also known as language attrition sets in transforming speakers into L2 monolinguals as shown below:

L1 monolingual ⟶ **L1 + L2 bilingual** ⟶ **L2 monolingual**

Key general features of L1 forgetting and L1 loss are shown in the Table 1 below. They are presented in a general way, due to the the wide range of speakers' backgrounds, language experiences, individual language behaviours, and language circumstances.

Table 1
KEY FEATURES: L1 Forgetting and L1 loss

Feature	Stage 1: L1 Forgetting Gradual L1 decline	Stage 2: L1 Loss Shift to L2
What it Looks Like	Struggle to find L1 words; use of simple sentence structures; borrowing vocabulary/grammatical rules from L2.	Severe vocabulary reduction; complete reliance on L2; L1 becomes the weaker language.
Primary Causes	A decrease in L1 use; high motivation to learn L2; increase in L2 use	Long stretch of time without L1 use; L2 becomes preferred and dominant language.
Fluency Speed	Slower speech rate with pauses; L2 features included in L1	Choppy, laboured L1 speech;

2 *How does the brain respond to changes in L1 use?*

When L1 is used regularly, language processing happens naturally in the brain's specialized language centres. The processing is effortless, involves low brain activity making speaking happen seamlessly in milliseconds to perform the following 3 tasks:

(1) locate or **access** the place where L1 knowledge is stored;

(2) **retrieve** or pull specific L1 words or grammar rules out of storage and bring them into working memory, and

(3) **recall** or physically produce L1 words.

A language shift - from exclusive L1 use to increased L2 use - does not go unnoticed by the brain. Rather the brain's language network, operating on a *use it or lose it* model, rewires and changes language processing:

- causes a spike in brain activity in the left hemisphere;
- structurally relocates L1 to the the prefrontal cortex;
- shifts L1 processing tasks to the executive control centres of the brain, the prefrontal cortex that is responsible for problem-solving, attention, and executive control;
- uses extra neural resources to suppress and block the once automatic tasks of L1 (access, retrieve and recall;
- in the L1-L2 competition, L2 routinely wins because higher exposure and more frequent use dictate which language becomes dominant;
- the lost L1 remains suppressed, blocked and dormant in the brain, making speaking a real struggle,
- over time, a speaker may lose the L1 accent or struggle to produce L1 sounds, particularly if the loss began before puberty.

3 *What happens to L1 comprehension?*

Speakers who struggle to speak L1 often happily report that they can *understand everything* they hear in the language they have forgotten. Here's why:

- speaking and understanding speech are two very different processes;
- unlike L1 speaking, understanding L1 requires very little brain activation;
- while speaking happens rapidly, a listener has time to process meaning order to understand;
- the brain continues to recognize L1 sounds that are stored in in the speaker's memory allowing language forgetters to retain their passive L1 knowledge and understand vocabulary and rapid or complex L1, yet
- over time, however, understanding rapid and complex L1 becomes difficult.

4 *Is L1 loss permanent?* NO!

As noted above, when L2 takes over, L1 does not disappear from the speaker's brain. It is relocated, suppressed and blocked. The desktop vs hard drive analogy is helpful here. It will simplify language loss in the brain by comparing this complex process to the computer: a dominant L2 sits right on the speakers's computer desktop, easily accessible with one click, while L1 is stored deep in a nested folder on an external hard drive. The L1 file exists, but it takes much longer to locate and access.

5 *Can a lost L1 be brought back or found?* YES!

The terms relearn, reactivate and revival all refer to a speakers's attempts to return their L1 to its former use. This is also referred to as reactivation of a passive language.

Here's the good news

- Language loss need not be permanent.
- It is not a result of brain degeneration or age-related cognitive impairment.
- L1 neural pathways are usually dormant rather than completely destroyed.
- A previously learned and used language never totally disappears.
- Losing the *ability* to access does not mean that L1 is forgotten forever.
- Re-learning a language is easier than learning it for the first time.
- Much of a previously acquired language remains in long-term memory.
- L1 structural knowledge remains in the brain.
- Because attrition is primarily an access issue rather than the physical destruction of brain tissue, weakened language processes can be reversed.

- People who are *good at language learning* better preserve their L1 regardless of how long they have been away from it.
- Age matters:

(a) moving to a new language environment at a very young age (1-2 years) with no continued L1 contact can result in completely loss;

(b) adults, with a rich past experience can reverse their reduced L1 proficiency by re-entering an environment where L1 takes on new meaning and is used daily, and

(c) adult L1 loss, on the other hand requires intense effort to reverse.

- People who are *good at language learning* better preserve their L1 regardless of how long they have been away from it.

6 Language recovery

• Re-learning a language is easier than learning it for the first time.

- Since your brain already laid the neural groundwork, your recall will be significantly faster than learning from scratch.
- Language recovery requires commitment, intensive long-term exposure, a great deal of practice and time.
- Change in language input and language environment makes a significant difference.
- L1 re-exposure or immersion rapidly drops the activation thresholds, clears the neural inhibition, and restores fluency much faster than learning a brand-new language from scratch.
- Length of time away from a language doesn't always matte.

Unlocking L1: Suggestions and strategies

Why do I want to relearn my L1?

• commit to unlock your L1;

- start with 10 minutes of L1 study per day;
- taking a L1 placement test will help you find your L1 starting point and help you understand your current level of vocabulary and grammar knowledge;
- begin your vocabulary recognition using DUOLINGO a widely popular L1 language learning platform; https://www.duolingo.com/
- read simple texts like children's books or bilingual texts out loud to reactivate your speaking muscles;
- record yourself as you read out loud;
- speak slowly and deliberately, even if it feels unnatural and don't worry about making mistakes;
- watch a movie you know: use L1 audio and subtitles;
- search the Internet for resources in your L1

- start a L1 WORD BOOK. Begin with simple L1 words and work your way up to simple sentences;
- find a L1 conversation partner: a friend, a family member or a youtube language companion;
- enrol in a L1 language course;
- engage a community L1 tutor for casual conversation;
- See: **RELEARN A LANGUAGE** (on YouTube)
  In this series a L1 (Polish) speaker explains how she lost and then relearned Polish.

Note

1 Language loss occurs on two distinct levels: personal (an individual forgetting and then losing a first language) and societal (a community language becoming extinct).

References

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RELEARN A LANGUAGE (on YouTube)
In this valuable series, a speaker explains how she lost and then relearned her L1(Polish)

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