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# **Growing up Overseas: Perceptions of Second Language Attrition and Retrieval Amongst Expatriate Children in India**

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This study involves expatriate children whose first language (L1) is English and who learned Hindi as their second language (L2) while their parents worked in India. The purpose of the study was to investigate the linguistic experiences of the children after they had left India, particularly experiences with L2 attrition. Through semi-structured interviews, subjects shared their stories of L2 acquisition and attrition. Common experiences which contributed to the attrition of the L2 included periods of non-use of the L2, social responses to the use of the L2, the lack of development of Hindi literacy and subjects' attitude toward using the L2. Some of the subjects were able to retrieve the L2 on return trips to India and an examination is made of their perceptions of what supported this retrieval process. These include exposure to the "environment" of India and personal motivation. The conclusion provides questions and suggestions for further research to contribute to a better understanding of the linguistic experiences of expatriate children.

Cette étude concerne les enfants expatriés de langue maternelle anglaise qui ont appris le hindi comme deuxième langue (L2) alors que leurs parents travaillaient en Inde. Le but de cette étude était d'enquêter sur les pratiques linguistiques usuelles de ces enfants une fois qu'ils avaient quitté l'Inde, avec un accent particulier sur l'érosion de la L2. Au cours d'entrevues semi-structurées, les participants ont raconté comment ils ont acquis et oublié la deuxième langue (L2). Les facteurs usuels d'érosion de la L2 comprennent des périodes de non utilisation de la L2, les réactions sociales à l'utilisation de la L2, le manque de développement de l'alphabétisation des participants en hindi, et leur attitude envers l'usage de la L2. Certains des participants ont pu récupérer la langue suite à un retour en Inde; ils attribuent cette récupération à plusieurs facteurs, notamment l'exposition à un environnement indien et la motivation personnelle. La conclusion formule des questions et des suggestions pour mener d'autres recherches afin de mieux comprendre les expériences linguistiques des enfants expatriés.

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### **Introduction**

In language acquisition, maintenance and attrition research, a significant group that has been overlooked has been children whose parents work overseas. Since they live outside their native country, these families are referred to as “expatriate”. The children often consider the country in which they reside to be their home as opposed to the country which their parents call home. The parents have occupations in the realms of military, business, education, diplomacy or international relief and development. As a result, the family may live in one country for many years or may move occasionally or frequently depending on the responsibilities of the parents. While in these countries, the expatriate children interact with native-speaking citizens and may acquire the language of the host country, although they speak the first language (L1) of their parents at home.

When the family leaves the area in which the child has developed linguistic abilities and returns home or moves to another country, the child often experiences a loss of their second language (L2) abilities. Along with the linguistic loss, there may be other psycho-emotional and socio-cultural results of this “nomadic” process (Ender, 2002; Pollock and Van Reken, 1999). This article identifies and discusses some common language attrition experiences of 23 expatriate children who grew up in India and are now adults. As well, it provides some examples of situations in which a childhood L2, Hindi,<sup>1</sup> was retrieved. Although other studies have focussed on language attrition, very few have considered the perceptions of those who experience the loss of the language. Further, few studies have considered the experiences of expatriate children. This article begins by providing an overview of the literature related to language attrition and retrieval and then considers the responses of the subjects involved in this study to an interview that was conducted at a school reunion. Their perceptions of language attrition, and in some cases retrieval, are presented based on commonalities that were expressed. Considerations for further research in this area are suggested in the conclusion.

### **Review of the Literature**

Much of the research that has been done in the study of language attrition began in 1980 as a result of the Conference on the Attrition of Language Skills at the University of Pennsylvania. The proceedings of this conference appeared in Lambert and Freed (1982). Following the conference, the study of language attrition gained greater attention. In order to provide a basic overview of language attrition, a definition of language attrition is presented, followed by an examination of different situations in which language attrition occurs. Finally, the concept of language retrieval is addressed. To the best of my knowledge, there has been no research conducted on the language attrition experiences of

expatriates, so the studies I refer to provide a reference point from which to consider their experiences.

*Language attrition* refers to “all types of decline of linguistic skills both in individuals and in speech communities” (de Bot and Weltens, 1995, p. 151). In contrast, *language retrieval* refers to the ability to regain skills in the attrited language. Sometimes this is referred to as language re-activation (de Bot and Stoessel, 2000). The term *attrition* is most frequently used to describe the phenomenon of language-skill deterioration because there is research that suggests a language is never lost (Weltens and Grendel, 1993). Weltens and Grendel suggest three stages of attrition. In the first stage, it takes longer than normal to retrieve required linguistic information. In the second stage, information is temporarily inaccessible; sometimes it is available, and sometimes it is not. Finally, in the third stage, information is completely and permanently inaccessible. Terms like *attrition*, *forgetting* and *retrieval failure* are all preferred to the word *loss* because the language is never really lost, it is just not accessible.

Attempts have been made to categorize types of language attrition. De Bot and Weltens (1995) suggest that part of the difficulty of research in the area of language attrition is simply the numbers of different reasons for language attrition. Some cases of language attrition are pathological, such as in the case of aphasics, while other reasons are non-pathological. In general, in non-pathological cases of language attrition, regression occurs because another language has come to replace the L1 as the person’s normal and regular means of communication. Van Els (1986) suggests four typologies that incorporate the process of language attrition and the environment in which it is attrited. An example of each is given in parentheses.

- loss of L1 in an L1 environment (elderly)
- loss of L1 in an L2 environment (immigrants)
- loss of L2 in an L1 environment (foreign language loss)
- loss of L2 in an L2 environment (L2 loss by aging immigrants)

These categories incorporate the non-pathological reasons for language attrition that de Bot and Weltens identify, and are helpful in describing the types of situations in which language attrition takes place.

Seliger and Vago (1991) was the first major work to examine the effects of the acquisition of an L2 on linguistic abilities in the L1. They examined sociolinguistic aspects such as the diminished role of the L1 in immigrant contexts where separation from the L1-speaking community occurs. Seliger and Vago suggest that prestige, social status and attitude can all impact L1 subordination or recessivism. Olshtain and Barzilay (1991) suggest that other factors, including restriction on the ability to speak the L1, contact with other L1 speakers

and individual degrees of acculturation in L2 all have an impact on L1 erosion. Gardner, Lalonde and MacPherson (1985) is one of the early works that has investigated factors which effect L2 attrition. Their research examines social factors such as attitude and motivation. There appears to be an important relationship between positive attitude toward a language and an ability to maintain it. However, they also suggest that the degree to which an L2 is acquired has a strong effect on how well it will be maintained. In other words, a language that is studied extensively and is well developed will not undergo attrition as much as a language which is not well developed, regardless of the attitude or motivation toward the language.

Thus far, we have examined what language attrition is and in what situations it occurs. Next, we consider what language groups tend to be considered in language attrition research. For the most part, language attrition research has concentrated on attrition within speakers of languages such as Celtic (Kravin, 1992), Dutch (Noels and Clement, 1989), Turkish (Yagmure, de Bot and Kozillius, 1999) or some of the First Nations languages (Crawford, 1996; Fishman, 1996). As an interesting example of these types of studies, Olshtain and Barzilay (1991) presented a situation in which an entire socio-cultural group experienced language attrition. In their study, Olshtain and Barzilay examined the attrition of English in adult native speakers of English living in a Hebrew-speaking environment in Israel. They found that, despite using English in many situations, and even though English was considered a “prestige language”, attrition of the English language did occur. Their conclusion was that “this is perhaps a unique context in which language attrition has the least chance to develop and yet we found an obvious feature of reduction in vocabulary retrieval” (1991, p. 149).

In the Canadian context, a number of recent language attrition studies have been conducted, particularly with a focus on L1 attrition. Priven (2002) examines a very specific case of language attrition, that of L1 pronoun attrition by Russian immigrants in Toronto. He found that immigrants who had been in Canada for over two years had a tendency to use formal and informal pronouns inappropriately, a tendency which he attributed to loss of an L1 distinction due to L2 influence. A recent oral history case study examined the language attrition experiences of Spanish-speaking families in Vancouver (Guardardo, 2000). Guardardo reports that a number of factors were critical in the maintenance of L1 skills: the role of the L1 culture, encouragement to speak the L1, consequences of L1 loss and maintenance, optimism about L1 development, importance of L1 literacy and L1 community. Guardardo’s study can be contrasted with another Canadian study which examined the linguistic experience of Ukrainian families in Toronto (Chumak-Horbatsch, 1999). Chumak-Horbatsch examines the changes in language behaviour of a group

of ten Ukrainian-speaking mothers and their children who had significant contact with the L1 (Ukrainian). Chumak-Horbatsch states that through the initial stage in the study both the mothers and children were essentially unilingual Ukrainian speakers. Chumak-Horbatsch then conducted similar tests with five of the pairs, ten years later, and found a reduction in spoken Ukrainian for both mothers and children and a partial replacement of the L1 by the L2. The most significant change took place in the home environment, where the Ukrainian-only home language rule had been broken between the two times of testing. Chumak-Horbatsch demonstrated that even in well-developed, fairly independent language communities, there is a danger of language attrition. It would seem that this danger increases in L2 attrition situations since there may not be a supporting linguistic community to help maintain the L2.

Interestingly, the number of studies examining individual cases of language attrition is limited (Anderson, 1999). Kaufman and Aronoff (1991) provide a longitudinal investigation of language attrition for a young native speaker of Hebrew when she moved to an environment in which English was the predominant language. In this study, despite speaking Hebrew exclusively at home, the child experienced an attrition of Hebrew language skills. Each of these studies, both from a group or individual case basis, indicate that language attrition can occur quickly when a person is in a language setting where the language is not dominant.

Lastly, we turn our attention to the potential of recovering a language that has been attrited. It is only recently that studies have been conducted in this area although further research into aspects of language retrieval may provide insights into the acquisition and attrition processes. If languages can be recovered after apparently being forgotten it would support the concept that languages are never really lost, they are just inaccessible. Two recent studies have examined this issue from relatively different perspectives. De Bot and Stoessel (2000) examine two cases of people who had not spoken L2 Dutch for more than 30 years. They consider the *savings approach*, which suggests that recall and recognition of certain lexical items will occur over time and that learning certain aspects of a language occurs more quickly for someone who has learned the language but forgotten it (that is, re-learning) than for someone learning the language for the first time. De Bot and Stoessel demonstrate that even when a language is only learned in childhood for a short period of time, there is still significant knowledge available after 30 years of non-use.

Tomiya's (1999, 2000) study of a Japanese boy who had lived most of his life in the United States provides an examination of the attrition of L2 English in the months following his return to Japan. In this case study,

Tomiyama observes that nearly three years after his return to Japan, the boy experienced some attrition but also regained some items that were earlier considered attrited. The studies by Tomiyama and by de Bot and Stoessel (2000) suggest mixed results regarding retrieval of an attrited language. Yet they provide indications that there is potential for a person who has experienced language attrition to retrieve that language later in life.

A review of the literature demonstrates a growing awareness and knowledge of factors affecting L1 and L2 attrition. However, a number of important research areas have not yet been significantly studied. One of these is an investigation of the linguistic experiences of children who may move from country to country as a result of the work of their parents. These children have unique linguistic and socio-cultural experiences that need to be examined. Furthermore, the research that has been conducted into language attrition has concentrated on linguistic measures of language loss (syntax and vocabulary, for example). Only limited research has been presented on a personal, narrative level of what it means to experience language attrition. Further research in both of these areas will supplement the growing literature on language attrition and retrieval.

### **The Study**

Many children of expatriates in India learned Hindi through the close friendships they made with Indian children or *ayahs* (nannies) while living overseas. At the same time as they were conversing with playmates in Hindi, the children learned English within the home environment. When they reached school age, many of these expatriate children were home-schooled or went to boarding school, or a combination of both. The language of instruction in both of these environments was English.

This study involves 23 former students (12 female, 11 male) of an international, boarding school in India. The school is a large, well-established school and many expatriate children attend. The subjects in this study ranged from students who had attended the school as recently as 15 years earlier to those who had studied there as long as 60 years earlier. Eighteen of the subjects had been born in India. The remaining five had all moved to India within the first few years of their lives. The average number of years spent in India was 18, and the average number of years at the school was 8. All 23 reported that they perceived they had experienced L2 Hindi attrition; 7 reported experiencing complete attrition, 11 partial attrition and 5 minimal attrition. They were interviewed based on a random sample of those who agreed to an interview at the school's annual reunion in North America. I was able to attend the reunion and conduct the interviews since I had attended the school as a child. I had experienced a personal attrition of L2 Hindi skills upon returning to Canada

as a child and I was interested in the experiences of others who had attended the school. The four-day reunion is held in different North American locations each year, and was held in the American Midwest the year this study was conducted. At the reunion, the former students participate in seminars, class meetings and cultural presentations that are connected with their Indian and school experience.

The subjects were provided with a clear statement of purpose indicating that the research was being conducted to gain their perceptions of language experiences while growing up in India. Nearly three quarters (17/23) had made return trips to India and of this group over three quarters (13/17) perceived that they had retrieved the L2 (Hindi) on these return trips (see Appendix A for more information).

The subjects were asked open-ended questions which centred around their reflections on their linguistic experiences growing up overseas. Two questionnaires were used: one for those who had returned to India, to investigate the potential of language retrieval; and one for those who had not returned to India, to see if they had maintained their Hindi-speaking abilities. Appendix B provides the guiding questions which were used for the two groups. All interviews were conducted in English and took place in a quiet area during the reunion. The interviews were taped and later transcribed. The comments of the subjects were cross-referenced with each other in order to determine commonalities in their perceptions. No attempts were made to determine the components of the grammar in which attrition took place (the lexicon or syntax, for example). Rather, the focus was to ask questions that would allow the subjects to share their reflections and perceptions of language attrition and retrieval.

Perhaps what captures the interesting nature of this study was Derek's<sup>2</sup> comment regarding language:

We were with 22 [school] graduates in India for a 50th anniversary reunion. All had roughly equivalent experience though some were there for shorter times. Some of the men and women who had gone through from the very beginning to the end at [the school] and who had never been back could pick up Hindi and talk Hindi, and yet others couldn't remember a thing. I don't know what the factor is there. It shook us how one man who we thought would be absolutely fluent couldn't remember anything, not only about the language, but about his life and experiences in those days.

The variety of experiences with language attrition and retrieval were extensive, yet a number of common perceptions and themes emerged from the interviews. This section of the paper will present these themes, supported by comments that are taken from some of the subjects' interviews.

## Results and Discussion

I identified three common perceptions of language attrition that emerged from the interviews: the effect of furloughs and trips “home”; inability to develop literacy in Hindi; and finally, concerns about making mistakes when speaking Hindi. Following a discussion of these perceptions, I will consider common reflections and experiences of those who were able to retrieve Hindi upon a return visit to India.

### *Perceptions of the Effect of Furloughs and Trips “Home”*

One commonality of those who experienced language attrition was the perceived social ramifications of speaking Hindi around those who did not know the language. This usually occurred when they returned to their parents’ homeland (either Canada or the United States) for furloughs<sup>3</sup> or vacations. The reactions that the children received from people in the L1 (English) environment caused a negative attitude to develop towards Hindi.

When I went back to the [United] States, my mother was once in a room with a group of women, and I came in and talked to her in Hindustani and they all laughed. They thought it was so cute. I remember just being mortified. From then on I don’t remember any Hindustani. It was just like it fled from my mind. When I came back [to India] it was a foreign language all of a sudden. Before, the Hindustani used to just come into my mind easily. It never did that again. . . . The difference between my Hindustani before that incident [negative experience during furlough] it was just like a child speaking English, you just talk. You don’t think through what you’re saying. And I couldn’t do that anymore. I had to think about what I wanted to say and try and find the words to say it. (Karen)

[On furlough] my cousins would make fun of us because we would ask, “please pass the *dude*”. Well, *dude* is milk. Or we would interchange some words like that or some terms were similarly used anywhere. “*Bus*” meant stop. We moved to Brooklyn, New York, and I didn’t have so much difficulty making the transition, but my younger brother was marched in front of the class and, “Oh, you’re from India. Come up here, speak in Indian.” The kid was flabbergasted: “What do you mean, ‘speak in Indian’?” Then everyone would laugh because he stumbled around. That just put a pall on him and he didn’t speak anymore. (Terry)

The negative social responses some children received when they spoke Hindi in their home country led them to the perception that this arrested the development of the language. People would make fun of them or label them as different. As a result, some were ashamed to use the language while on furlough or upon permanent return to the home country. This seems to be in keeping with the experiences of other children who move frequently from

country to country (Pollock and Van Reken, 1999). For the subjects in this study, the reaction of adults or their peers in North America led to embarrassment and a reluctance to maintain the Hindi language. This finding supports Ender's (2002) observation that negative attention may be directed to expatriate children because of their unfamiliarity with social nuances in their parents' home country. This can have a significant emotional impact on them and may influence their desire and willingness to speak the L2.

In some cases, it was not a negative response to their speaking Hindi that caused the arrest in the development of the language as much as simply the break away from the language. The furlough was a critical break. As a young child, the subject would live with his or her parents and interact significantly with an *ayah* and Indian playmates. However, frequently following the first furlough, and upon returning to India, the child (having reached school age) would be sent to boarding school. The child no longer had significant contact with the *ayah* or Indian playmates. The primary language became English. Most of the people who live in the community surrounding the school are able to speak in English so Hindi is rarely needed to converse. When the child returned from the school to be with the family, for only a few months of the year, he or she would no longer have the connection with former playmates and thus, would not develop his or her Hindi language skills.

Indian people around us used to say that I spoke like a villager, which was a compliment, but when I went back [after furlough] because I was young and then went to school, I didn't spend my time in Marathi territory. . . . I never used it in any good solid way, just getting along, and it's just scraps. (Rosa)

That first furlough really arrested my Hindi development I believe. It was that it was totally English. In school I didn't need it. On the plains, by then, most of the little kids I had grown up with had already left. So I no longer had the playmates down there. So my playmates became the missionary kids. (Rand)

Certainly, furloughs played a significant role in the attrition of the Hindi language in children. Subjects reflected that, whether due to the emotional distress of speaking a different language in the home country or due to the physical separation from the place and people with whom they had Hindi contact, furloughs contributed to language attrition.

### ***Perception of the Inability to Develop Hindi Literacy***

Another commonality amongst those who experienced attrition of the Hindi language was that they perceived that they had performed poorly in Hindi taught at the school. Although the curriculum is American based and the classes

are taught in English, students are required to take a Hindi class. Seven of the participants commented that they felt that their Hindi had attrited because they never mastered Hindi as a formal language. This supports the point made by Gardner *et al.* (1985) that the degree to which an L2 is acquired has a strong effect on how well it will be maintained. These subjects had done poorly in language classes and for some the language became stigmatized. Related to this, they did not see the value in learning Hindi since they did not need it in the school environment. In the area where the school is located, the students could shop, get a taxi and accomplish basic tasks without needing to speak Hindi. Learning Hindi at the school became like learning a foreign language instead of the natural acquisition process which had occurred prior to the start of formal schooling

We were required to take Hindi in school and I just messed around with it. I wasn't conscientious, I was not interested and I didn't really care what kind of grades I got. After my mother died and we moved, my dad hired a tutor for me. I really made no effort to learn. It seemed so hard to me. I wanted it to come to me without having to work for it. (Karen)

We had to take Hindi all through elementary and I learned nothing. I'll be perfectly honest. Because of teachers and desire. There was no need [to learn]. It was definitely survival [before going to school]. I guess I learned because everyone spoke Hindi I had to learn Hindi. At [the school], you didn't need Hindi so there was no need. You knew already that you could get by so to learn proper Hindi didn't make sense. (Rand)

A different perspective was provided by Jennie, who focussed on the fact that, although she learned to write in the Hindi script, there was not enough verbal reinforcement of Hindi in the school environment.

We didn't do that much dialoguing in our language classes at school. Just writing, I had to write essays, spelling tests, dictation, so there was very little expected dialogue and they didn't force it on us.

The subjects who identified their poor performance in formal Hindi classes as part of the reason for the attrition of the language reflected that it would have been better maintained if they had worked harder or had been required to take reading and writing classes in Hindi.

### ***A Fear of Making Mistakes***

Fear of making mistakes is another commonality amongst those whose Hindi language skills attrited. Interestingly, it was not a fear the subjects experienced

while growing up in India, but only once they had returned to the L1 environment. The fear usually was a result of not wanting to make grammatical errors when speaking with Indians.

I think there's a fear of the grammar. I wanted to get the grammar in place. So I understand more than I'm willing to speak. (Jennie)

I think being somewhat a shy person, I think you're a little afraid of being stupid when you're trying to say things, which is too bad. It impedes your use of the language. (Rosa)

When I'm in this country speaking to Indians, I'm very self-conscious and very aware of my grammatical errors, which makes me speak very hesitantly, but that's what kind of evaporated when I went back, whether it's good grammar or not. And I don't know why I feel that way over here because Indians ... appreciate it when you speak to them in Hindi. (Sue)

Hesitation to speak Hindi because they did not have a perfect command of the language impeded the linguistic ability of these subjects. Whether the fear was grounded or imaginary did not seem to matter. Even recognizing the fact that most Indians would understand if grammatical errors were made did not necessarily seem to alter the perception.

Although all subjects had perceived at least a minimal attrition of their Hindi skills, many (13/17) were able to retrieve, to some degree, the attrited language when they returned to India at a later time in their lives. Although none of the subjects had maintained the language at the same level of proficiency that they had possessed while living in India, they perceived that they had encountered a variety of experiences that assisted in their regaining proficiency in Hindi. These include: exposure to the "environment" of India, efforts to intermingle with Indian people in India and efforts to maintain contact with the language when not in India.

### ***Exposure to the Indian Environment***

A common perception amongst the 13 subjects who experienced a retrieval of the language was that exposure to the "sounds and smells" of India helped regain the language. It appears that being back in a familiar location helped "recapture" the language; simply the exposure to India appeared to trigger the release of the language. The subjects could not necessarily explain how this took place, but they perceived that it was due to the re-immersion in the environment of their childhood.

It was the total impact of being in India and the stimulation that generated. The feel for the language came back right away. (Todd)

I categorize it as a three-week transition. The first week, I was understanding some of the words, speaking back with a “Hello” or something. The second week, I was being able to understand most of the conversation of anyone coming to me, but in talking back I would wait for a word and think in English, “What is the translation?” By the end of the third week, it had all come back and I was thinking in the language. It takes a little time to get re-acquainted. It depends on my immersion into the language because quite often it’s just talking, asking directions, or something. Well, that’s not good immersion. You have to talk with people at the bazaar or talk with a servant who knew me and talk with them quite a bit. And then it begins coming back. I didn’t have to do anything. It just came back. (Terry)

[Going] back to India, it all comes back. Here, at this Class of ‘78 reunion, it was just flooding back again. It was there. A totally unconscious thing. . . . but going back there it opens that door again. It’s as if it’s in me all the time. And the door opens and it floods. (Rand)

I was going back in the jungle [to his boyhood home] and with people who only knew Marathi. But those experiences that I had in the jungle, knowing the plants, knowing the trees, knowing the animals and their names, all came back to me and I was able to converse with them. I think it was osmosis. It just comes back. Through the wind, the dust, or the smells. The smells trigger certain thoughts and certain memories that you didn’t have before. (Terry)

These comments provide fascinating insights into how re-immersion in the environment of one’s childhood may assist in the retrieval of a childhood language. These subjects indicated that they were immersed in the environment. They were not reliant on others to translate for them. In these cases, language retrieval occurred simply as a result of being “re-acquainted” with the sights and sounds of their childhood. This provides support for the conclusions of Weltens and Grendel (1993) and Tomiyama (2000) that a language is never totally lost, but at least in the initial stages of attrition, may be temporarily inaccessible. The re-immersion into the Indian environment may have served as a mechanism to allow the retrieval of the language.

### ***Efforts to Interact with People from India***

Making an effort to use Hindi upon returning to India and travelling with people who did not speak English was a common experience amongst those who regained the language. It would seem that their desire to “re-experience” the language contributed to its return. As well, the fact that they had to rely on their own ability may have assisted the retrieval of the language.

Just hearing it and speaking with the people [helped regain the language]. I made an effort to speak with them. A lot of them spoke English, but there were other people from the other trips who had learned Angami and I spoke to them a little bit in Angami. . . . I went alone. (Karly)

I have to say that each time I go back I surprise myself because the level I left before comes back completely. It's just that, you don't use it, but it's still there. I learned more as well. Again, it's still very superficial and I still have to excuse myself. After a bit I say, "I know a lot of this sounds childish because I learned as a child", and people are quite happy with that. "Oh", they say, "You speak perfect Hindi. I understand you completely." (Rand)

The amount of time and also the amount of interaction [contributed to the retrieval]. Train travel, for example. Although everyone wants to try their English if you go Second Class, Three Tier, you're in with whoever you're in with. And people are curious. Lots of questions in Hindi. And I could answer those as long as they kept them simple. I enjoy Indian people. I think they're fun. I don't know how it does [come back] except that it's somewhere there. And why it does - it just needs someone to talk to. It's a fun language and I wish I could keep it up. (Lilly)

A desire to "re-immersed" oneself in a childhood language appears to assist in the re-learning of that language. A desire to re-integrate with Indians and speak the language was perceived as a successful strategy in retrieving the Hindi language.

#### *Efforts to Maintain Contact with the Language when not in India*

Finally, making an effort to be around Indian people and use the language while in the home country (Canada or the United States) seemed to be a common theme among those who regained use of Hindi. In many ways this is similar to the experience of those who made an effort to immerse themselves when they returned to India. There did not seem to be a significant concern about making mistakes or being embarrassed. A greater emphasis was placed on trying to retrieve the language than to worry about errors. April, for example, left India in 1947 and has not returned since. However, she has experienced both language attrition and retrieval while in North America.

We've had some Indian friends and they've spoken Hindi and my Hindi starts coming back when I'm around people who speak good Hindi. Now I have a Gujarati friend, she speaks Hindi and she helps me to recall my Hindi. Sometimes, I'll be with her and I'll say, "Ah, I remembered a new word", and she'll laugh. I find it fun to be around Indians, and that's what spurs me on, because I love to be around them and hear them talk and eat their food. Sometimes, you know, a word will come to me, when I'm with

my Indian friends, and I'll say, "Oh, I haven't thought of that word for 50 years", and it comes back as though I've had it all along. When it comes back it's as if it never left me, which is amazing to me because why, why did I lose it?

April's experience illustrates how people may retrieve a language even when not immersed in the language environment. Her willingness to be involved with Indians and speak the language while in North America allowed her to experience retrieval of the language despite the low frequency of contact with people from India. Further, despite the fact that it had been more than 50 years since April had been in India, and with only limited use of the Hindi language, it seems that the language is still available. This indicates support for de Bot and Stoessel's (2000) study which involved subjects who demonstrated significant knowledge of an L2 despite 30 years of non-use. Gardner *et al.* (1985) suggest that attitude and motivation have a significant effect on the maintenance of an L2. Subjects who wanted to continue to interact with Indians and the Hindi language while they were living in North America demonstrate an attitude that supported the maintenance of the L2.

### Conclusion

This investigation of people's perceptions of their experiences with a childhood language has provided a wide variety of challenging and interesting insights into the topics of language attrition and retrieval. The 23 subjects had a variety of perceptions about their language experiences. However, each subject had either undergone language attrition and not regained the language or had self-reported a loss of language skills but had then experienced language retrieval. The subjects who experienced a retrieval of Hindi did so in different ways and to different degrees. This provides interesting support for de Bot and Stoessel's (2000) study, which examined the re-activation of a childhood language in which even brother-sister pairs with very similar linguistic experiences had significantly different levels of language retrieval. Further, this current study has demonstrated, at least in the reflections of four subjects who returned to India but did not regain the language, that complete language attrition can occur despite a re-immersion into the environment. It appears that they have moved beyond Weltens and Grendel's (1993) levels of attrition or forgetting to the point of inability to retrieve the language.

All of the subjects, except four, reported developing significant fluency in Hindi, at least up to the point of entering school or returning to North America for a furlough. The inability of many of the subjects to develop strong Hindi skills after these critical breaks may have prevented the L2 from becoming fully acquired. It is interesting to consider that the typology of language attrition that van Els (1986) proposes does not fully incorporate the experiences of

the subjects in the current study. For these subjects, L2 attrition occurred in the L1 environment, yet the L2 was a naturally learned language, and not a foreign language as discussed by van Els. Further, some subjects indicated that they were concerned about how they sounded when they spoke the L2 and they perceived that this inhibited their conversational skills. Their attitude toward the L2 may have affected their ability to maintain it (Gardner, 1982).

This study is limited in a number of ways. First, I rely on the subjects' self-reporting and perceptions of their experiences. There is value in this approach because it provides a personal and reflective, albeit subjective, perspective. This personal perspective allows us to understand in a different and richer way the subjects' unique experiences. An examination of personal reflections and perspectives can provide insight that is learner-centred and so helps to shape a better understanding of the learning that has occurred (Nunan, 1989). Another limitation, related to the previous point, is that I rely on reflections from a sole interview. It is difficult to verify the comments of the subjects other than through the subjects' own checking of the transcript. It would be interesting to include the reflections of others who had had contact with the subjects either while they were children or upon their return trips to India. These could substantiate the subjects' reported language experiences. Finally, there are many variables which were not discussed in this study. Based on the data presented, it is not possible to identify clear correlations between data sets. For example, it would be interesting to know if any of the subjects learned another language upon their return to North America and how that related to their maintenance of Hindi. However, this study does provide insight into the reflections of those who have actually experienced language attrition. As well, it provides opportunity to consider how a language may be retrieved at a later point in life.

As research in the area of language attrition has increased, a critical question could be asked: Why does the study of language attrition matter? Perhaps the most appropriate response is to consider the predominant example of L1 attrition in Canada — when children of immigrants learn English or French as an L2 in the school and community, and through the media. The acquisition of the L2 may lead to an inability to communicate fully with their parents in the L1. Even if the family makes a determined effort to maintain the L1, either at home or through heritage language classes, attrition can take place. In some cases, the person would return to a state of being monolingual but with the L2 replacing the L1 (Seliger and Vago, 1991). Conversely, a person who has experienced language attrition may never feel completely comfortable in either the L1 or the L2. This can result in a disintegration of the family unit as the child does not feel confident in speaking the heritage language of their parents and the parents do not feel comfortable with the language of their child (Wong Fillmore, 2000). Lily Wong Fillmore's nationwide study (1991) of language shift among minority language children in the United States demonstrated that

primary language loss can be very costly to the children, their families and society. This may cause significant emotional and socio-cultural ramifications for immigrant families because they are not able to completely communicate within the family context (Kouritzin, 1999). Research also demonstrates that bilingualism supports metalinguistic awareness (Cummins, 1978). Thus, the development of a second or third language should be encouraged, and conversely, the attrition of a language discouraged, whether that be an L1 or an L2.

Further research needs to be done to determine why people experience language attrition in different ways and what methods could be incorporated to assist in retrieving an attrited language. Many children of expatriate parents may undergo similar language experiences, and further research to explore their experiences is needed. For example, is it common that expatriate children wish to retain or retrieve a childhood language? Could further efforts be made to prevent language attrition when children return from foreign countries? What is the role of international schools in this educational process? Do the parents of expatriate children recognize their children's need to maintain a childhood language and want to assist them? How could expatriate parents be encouraged to help their children maintain an L2 (or L3)? What psycho-emotional issues are involved in the attrition of a language for expatriate children? Can teachers of language courses be more sensitive and knowledgeable about how to diminish the potential of attrition? Although this study is limited because it relies solely on the perceptions of the subjects, it does provide insight into their experiences. Extended case studies could provide rich narratives that would allow us to further understand the experiences of those who have learned a language and then experienced attrition of that language.

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> While subjects learned a number of different languages of India — Hindi and Marathi, for example — and different dialects of these languages, for ease of exposition I will use Hindi as a cover term, although the subjects sometimes mention specific languages.
- <sup>2</sup> All names are pseudonyms.
- <sup>3</sup> Furloughs are times when families that serve with some international organizations are given the opportunity to return to their home country. In some cases, mostly in church organizations, this would only take place every three to five years.

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**Appendix A:  
Subject Background and Experiential Overview**

Subject	Sex	Age at interview	Born in India?	Learned Hindi as child?	Years of boarding school in India	Years living in India	Attrition <sup>1</sup>	No. of return trips to India	Use of Hindi in home country	Perceived retrieval <sup>2</sup>	Home country
Tony	M	35	Yes	Yes	1	6	C	2	Never	No	US
Jeremy	M	50	Yes	Yes	7	14	M	2	Regularly	Yes	US
Kim	F	38	No <sup>3</sup>	No	3.5	8	C	0	Rarely	Did not return	Canada
Kent	M	68	Yes	Yes	12	21	M	7	Regularly	Yes	US
Leslie	F	74	Yes	Yes	4	10	C	1 <sup>4</sup>	Never	No	US
Sue	F	66	Yes	Yes	13	18	P	6	Regularly	Yes	US
Todd	M	74	Yes	Yes	10	15	P	10+	Regularly	Yes	US
Tim	M	76	Yes	Yes	9	10	C	1 <sup>5</sup>	Rarely	No	US
Rosa	F	69	Yes	Yes	7	11	C	2	Never	No	US
Karly	F	67	Yes	Yes	7	13	P	3	Occasionally	Yes	US
Derek	M	69	Yes	Yes	10	34	M	10+	Regularly	Yes	US
Pat	F	77	Yes	Yes	2	15	C	1 <sup>6</sup>	Rarely	Yes	US
April	F	67	Yes	Yes	8	13	P	0	Occasionally	Did not return	US
Andrew	M	44	Yes	Yes	10	19	M	1 <sup>7</sup>	Regularly	Yes	US
Frank	M	79	No <sup>8</sup>	No	10	13	P	0	Occasionally	Did not return	US
Karen	F	72	Yes	Yes	8	15	C	0	Never	Did not return	US
Erin	F	39	Yes	Yes	5	13	P	0	Occasionally	Did not return	Canada
Jennie	F	37	No <sup>9</sup>	No	11	15	P	5+	Occasionally	Yes	Canada
Emily	F	36	No <sup>10</sup>	No	8	18	P	0	Rarely	Did not return	Canada
Terry	M	72	Yes	Yes	4	26	M	3 <sup>11</sup>	Regularly	Yes	US
Craig	M	39	Yes	Yes	12	14	P	2	Occasionally	Yes	Canada
Rand	M	34	No <sup>12</sup>	Yes	12	14	P	3	Occasionally	Yes	Canada
Lilly	F	66	Yes	Yes	11	18	P	3	Rarely	Yes	US

<sup>1</sup> C = Complete; P = Partial; M = Minimal.

<sup>2</sup> Perception of Hindi retrieval upon return visit(s) to India.

<sup>3</sup> Came at age 4.5 years.

<sup>4</sup> 45 years later.

<sup>5</sup> 28 years later.

<sup>6</sup> 46 years later.

<sup>7</sup> 11 years later.

<sup>8</sup> Came at age 4 years.

<sup>9</sup> Came at age 9 months.

<sup>10</sup> Came at age 10 months.

<sup>11</sup> Was a teacher in India for 20+ years as well.

<sup>12</sup> Came at age 1.5 years.

## Appendix B: Questionnaire

### *Group I: Former students who had not returned to India*

1. Were you born in India? If not, at what age did you go to India?
2. How long did you live in India?
3. Where did you live (list all places)?
4. When did you attend \_\_\_\_\_ School?
5. Did you learn Hindi/dialect and English simultaneously as a child in India?
6. Did you mix Hindi/dialect and English words as a child (ie. in a sentence some words were Hindi/dialect and others were English)?
7. How did you learn Hindi/dialect (ie. parents, playing with Indian playmates, school)?
8. What types of conversations do you remember having in Hindi/dialect (ie. market, playground, transportation, etc.)
9. How well were you able to speak Hindi/dialect when you left India (ie. fluently, partially, at what age/grade level)?
10. Have you ever dreamed in Hindi/dialect since leaving India?
11. How long has it been since you left India?
12. How well are you currently able to speak Hindi/dialect?
13. Are you able to speak no/little/lot/fluently Hindi/dialect? Elicit response (ie. if a little, what types of phrases are remembered). If the subject can speak little/lot/fluently ask why the subject can do this (ie. parents still speak the language, subject speaks with Indian people, reads Hindi, etc.). If subject can speak no/little Hindi ask the subject what s/he attributes this to (ie. age when returned to North America, lack of Hindi/dialect reinforcement, lack of formal teaching while in India, etc.)?

### *Group II: Former students who have returned to India*

1. Were you born in India? If not, at what age did you go to India?
2. How long did you live in India?
3. Where did you live (list all places)?
4. When did you attend \_\_\_\_\_ School?
5. Did you learn Hindi/dialect and English simultaneously as a child in India?
6. Did you mix Hindi/dialect and English words as a child (ie. in a sentence some words were Hindi/dialect and others were English)?
7. How did you learn Hindi/dialect (ie. parents, playing with Indian playmates, school)?
8. What types of conversations do you remember having in Hindi/dialect (ie. market, playground, transportation, etc.)?
9. How well were you able to speak Hindi/dialect when you left India (For example, fluently? Partially? At what age/grade level?)?
10. Have you ever dreamed in Hindi/dialect since leaving India?
11. How many times have you returned to India? When? List the time while in India and the time interval between visits.
12. How well were you able to speak Hindi/dialect before you returned to India (ie. fluently, partially, at what age/grade level)?
13. How well were you able to speak Hindi/dialect when you returned to India (ie. no/little/lot/fluently)?
14. Were there certain words/phrases that you remembered once in India?
15. Did you find any difference between being able to speak Hindi/dialect and being able to understand what was being said (ie. was one easier?)

16. If Hindi/dialect ability increased while in India what helped this occur (ie. amount of time spent on the return trip to India, amount of time spent in conversation/situations with Indian people, lack of interaction with English-speaking people, etc.)?
17. What situations helped recover Hindi/dialect while in India (ie. casual conversations, market, transportation, church services, bartering, emergency, argument)?
18. Were you able to completely recover Hindi/dialect to the same extent you had it when you originally left India?
19. How well are you able to speak Hindi/dialect now?
20. Are there any other insights you want to add into the issue of recovering Hindi/dialect?