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Language contact and language attrition

The frameworks of language attrition and language contact (in a synchronic perspective) have in common that they investigate the impact of a second language (L2) on the first (L1). The difference is that both approaches generally focus on different speaker populations. Whereas typical attrition research analyses first generation migrants in an L2 environment, language contact research generally focusses on the use of languages in multilingual speech communities. However, approaches which address language contact in immigrant settings demonstrate that the linguistic features found in individual attrition and typical language contact settings follow the same development path. These approaches try to integrate the individual and societal perspective by assuming that language contact starts at the level of the individual speaker and in course of time is spread throughout the speech community (e.g. Clyne, 2003, Matras, 2009, Riehl, 2014). In this context, contact-induced changes in a language have to be discerned from other internal processes of language change which are also common in language attrition and language shift, i.e. simplification processes of the grammatical system (cf. Riehl, 2019).

This paper starts from the different notions of contact-induced language change and discusses the different processes involved (transfer, restructuring and simplification strategies), both from a cognitive and linguistic perspective. The particular processes will be illustrated by examples from language contact situations worldwide. It will be demonstrated that despite individual variations there are instances of transference which occur in different speakers and different communities independently. While the focus will be on first and second generation speakers of German as a heritage language, the paper will also give an insight into the development of language contact settings in German-speaking enclaves in Eastern Europe, Australia and Latin America.