

Research Article

First Language Retention and Loss in Immigrant Communities

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Abstract: This article investigates the complex interplay of cognitive, psychological, and sociocultural factors that influence first language (L1) retention and loss among adult immigrants. Drawing on empirical studies across diverse linguistic communities, it identifies key variables such as community infrastructure, emotional investment, language dominance, and identity alignment as critical predictors of attrition. The study combines theoretical frameworks from bilingual memory research with real-world data on usage patterns, fluency decline, and lexical access difficulties. Findings show that L1 attrition is rarely uniform; it reflects dynamic shifts in motivation, exposure, and perceived language value. Visual data highlight significant variation in L1 use and erosion across immigrant contexts, reinforcing the argument that structural support plays a decisive role in language resilience. The article concludes by framing L1 retention not only as a matter of individual choice but also as an issue of linguistic equity. Recommendations include expanding heritage language education for adults, integrating multilingual policies in public services, and promoting societal attitudes that view L1 maintenance as a strength rather than a deficit.

Keywords: first language attrition, language retention, adult immigrants, bilingualism, language shift, heritage language, community language support

1. Introduction

Migration often reshapes an individual's physical, cultural, and psychosocial landscapes. Central to this transformation is the realm of language. For many adult immigrants, resettlement in a new sociolinguistic environment entails not only the acquisition of a second language (L2) but also a gradual negotiation and reconfiguration of their linguistic repertoire, particularly their first language (L1). This complex interplay between L1 and L2 can lead to varied linguistic outcomes, ranging from sustained bilingualism to a marked shift in dominance or, in some cases, the erosion of the L1 – a phenomenon commonly referred to as L1 attrition (Schmid & Köpke, 2017).

In this context, Berestetska (2012) discusses the globalization aspects of modern society as a pedagogical problem, highlighting the challenges faced by immigrant communities in maintaining their L1 while adapting to new educational contexts. Bhinder (2023) argues that contemporary educational discourse serves as a key tool in modernizing educational environment, which is crucial for adapting to the evolving needs of diverse student populations, including immigrant communities. Additionally, some authors (Das et al., 2023; Parvez & Syed Tanim Ahmed, 2023) explored the philosophy of contemporary educational management, emphasizing the role of inclusive practices in addressing the diverse needs of students.

L1 attrition is a dynamic and multidimensional process influenced by both internal cognitive mechanisms and external sociocultural variables. Unlike language acquisition, which has been extensively researched in children and young bilinguals, L1 attrition in adults remains relatively underexplored. Attrition typically manifests in the form of lexical retrieval difficulties, reduced grammatical accuracy, and changes in phonological or syntactic processing (Gürel & Yılmaz, 2011). Importantly, these changes are not uniform across individuals. Factors such as age of migration, length of residence, frequency and context of L1 use, social integration, emotional attachment to the language, and language ideologies in the host society all play pivotal roles in determining the trajectory of L1 maintenance or decline (Montrul, 2016; de Bot & Weltens, 1991).

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Empirical studies suggest that the neural networks supporting L1 may undergo restructuring when exposure to the L1 diminishes significantly in favor of L2 use (Köpke & Schmid, 2004). Yet, L1 attrition is not simply a matter of neural plasticity. Social context and identity-related variables deeply mediate linguistic behavior. In communities with strong ethnic enclaves, frequent code-switching, and rich intergenerational language transmission, L1 can persist robustly over decades (Tannenbaum & Berkovich, 2005). Conversely, in environments with assimilationist pressures or stigmatization of minority languages, L1 usage may diminish rapidly, even among individuals with high initial proficiency (Clyne, 1991; Schmid, 2011). In the study, Ramesh (2023) highlights the importance of designing remedial English courses tailored to students from non-English medium backgrounds, which is essential for effective communication and academic success.

Furthermore, the psychological implications of L1 attrition are significant. Research links L1 maintenance to emotional well-being, cognitive flexibility, and cultural identity continuity (Guardado, 2002; Pavlenko, 2004). Conversely, the erosion of L1 can result in a sense of linguistic insecurity, disconnection from family members, and loss of cultural heritage (Kanno, 2008). These consequences underscore the need to approach L1 attrition not only as a linguistic phenomenon but also as a deeply human and social experience.

Despite its importance, L1 attrition in adult immigrants remains understudied relative to heritage language development in children or general bilingual language processing. A growing body of research has attempted to bridge this gap by incorporating interdisciplinary approaches that merge psycholinguistic, neurolinguistic, and sociolinguistic frameworks (Gürel, 2004). Such approaches have emphasized the plasticity of bilingualism, the reversibility of some attrition effects, and the potential for L1 reactivation through structured re-immersion or increased L1 input (Isurin, 2000; Gürel & Yılmaz, 2011).

This study contributes to the evolving discourse by synthesizing key theoretical models and empirical findings related to L1 attrition among adult immigrants. It aims to offer a holistic understanding of the phenomenon, treating it as a fluid and context-sensitive process embedded within broader social, emotional, and political structures.

The aim of this research is to examine the phenomenon of L1 attrition in adult immigrants through an interdisciplinary lens, integrating psycholinguistic and sociolinguistic perspectives to identify the cognitive and social variables that shape L1 maintenance and decline after migration.

Research questions are the following:

- 1) What cognitive factors contribute most significantly to L1 attrition in adult immigrants?
- 2) How do social and emotional variables influence the maintenance or erosion of L1 among adult immigrants?
- 3) In what ways do different sociopolitical contexts and language ideologies in host countries affect the trajectory of L1 attrition?
- 4) To what extent is L1 attrition reversible, and what strategies or conditions support L1 recovery or maintenance?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Sociocultural Context of L1 Retention and Loss

Language use among immigrants transcends the private domain, functioning as a complex sociocultural phenomenon shaped by structural forces, institutional frameworks, and collective ideologies. For adult immigrants, in particular, L1 maintenance amid the hegemony of a dominant language is not solely a function of individual motivation or cognitive resilience. Rather, it necessitates systemic support, social opportunity, and the recognition of linguistic diversity as a legitimate aspect of public and private life. L1 retention or attrition must therefore be understood as an outcome emerging from the interplay between personal agency and broader sociopolitical contexts (Fishman, 1991; Hornberger, 2002).

National language policies are among the most influential structural determinants of language behavior within immigrant communities. In assimilationist policy regimes – such as those of the United States and France – the dominant language is often intertwined with ideologies of nationalism, citizenship, and socioeconomic mobility (Piller, 2016). These discourses frequently marginalize minority languages, framing their use as antithetical to integration. This can exert both overt and covert pressure on immigrants to suppress or abandon their L1, particularly in public and institutional contexts (Tollefson, 1991).

Conversely, multicultural or multilingual policy environments, such as those in Canada or Switzerland, tend to encourage additive bilingualism by embedding linguistic diversity within conceptions of civic inclusion (Baker, 2011). Nonetheless, the efficacy of such policies often hinges on their local implementation, availability of resources, and prevailing sociopolitical climate (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000).

Community-level linguistic ecosystems also significantly affect L1 maintenance. Immigrants residing in dense ethnic enclaves typically encounter frequent opportunities to use their L1 in religious, commercial, and social domains, thereby reinforcing linguistic vitality (Zhou & Bankston, 2001). These spaces serve as linguistic “safe zones” that buffer against attrition by facilitating habitual and functionally diverse language use (Portes & Rumbaut, 2005). However, in more linguistically diffuse or assimilation-oriented environments, adult immigrants may lack both the interlocutors and the institutional infrastructure necessary to sustain active L1 engagement. Social isolation, linguistic insecurity, or perceived stigma can further accelerate the shift toward the dominant language, even among individuals with initially high L1 proficiency (Kouritzin, 1999).

Educational institutions exert substantial influence over language maintenance trajectories. In countries where schooling is exclusively conducted in the dominant language, adult immigrants may be systematically excluded from formal avenues of L1 reinforcement or intergenerational language transmission (Cummins, 2005). The marginalization of heritage languages in adult education and mainstream curricula perpetuates a monolingual ideology that devalues linguistic plurality (Sierens & Van Avermaet, 2016). At the same time, bilingual and heritage language programs have been shown to positively impact L1 retention and to promote the transmission of cultural knowledge across generations (Fishman, 2001). Nevertheless, such programs remain unevenly distributed and are frequently underfunded, particularly for less widely spoken or socioeconomically marginalized languages (Hornberger & Wang, 2008).

Language prestige is another crucial variable in the sociocultural valuation of immigrant languages. The perceived symbolic capital of a language within the host society influences both its public visibility and its private retention (Bourdieu, 1991). Languages associated with global influence are more likely to receive institutional and media support. Conversely, minority or regionally bound languages (e.g., Somali, Kurdish, Tagalog) are often relegated to the margins of public discourse, contributing to internalized linguistic inferiority and voluntary attrition (Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004). These hierarchies of linguistic value are reinforced through media representation, educational policy, and public discourse, all of which shape individual attitudes toward L1 preservation.

Digital and traditional media access serves as a facilitator of L1 exposure and lexical richness. Immigrants who consume television, radio, literature, or online content in their native language are more likely to preserve fluency, especially in comprehension and vocabulary retention domains (Pauwels, 2016). The proliferation of digital platforms has democratized access to L1 media, enabling even geographically isolated individuals to engage with their linguistic heritage. However, passive exposure is often insufficient to maintain productive language skills, especially in contexts that lack real-time interpersonal communication (Köpke & Schmid, 2004).

Language is also deeply embedded in the construction of social identity. For many immigrants, the use of L1 serves not only as a communicative tool but also as a marker of belonging, continuity, and affective connection (De Houwer & Ortega, 2018). When a L1 is delegitimized – either through systemic marginalization or internalized shame – language attrition can proceed more rapidly and with more profound psychological consequences (Pavlenko, 2004). L1 loss is thus not only a cognitive or linguistic issue, but a question of identity negotiation and emotional resilience.

Intergenerational dynamics add another layer of complexity to language retention. Adult immigrants frequently operate as linguistic mediators between their parents and children. Although they may function in the dominant language in the public sphere, they often bear the responsibility of preserving the linguistic and cultural heritage within the private domain (Kupisch & Rothman, 2016). However, when their children shift to L2 dominance, adults may gradually adapt by incorporating more L2 into domestic communication. This reciprocal shift accelerates attrition and leads to asymmetrical bilingualism across generations (Guardado, 2002; Tannenbaum & Howie, 2002).

Therefore, L1 retention among adult immigrants cannot be conceptualized as a function of personal discipline or cognitive capacity alone. It is a multidimensional outcome rooted in

systems of access, social validation, and ideological recognition. While some immigrant communities succeed in cultivating multilingual resilience, others face structural barriers that privilege monolingualism and delegitimize linguistic diversity. In such environments, L1 attrition becomes not merely an individual experience, but a collective cultural loss that diminishes the societal richness of multilingualism and interrupts intergenerational transmission of identity and heritage.

2.2. Cognitive and Psychological Dimensions

While the sociocultural environment exerts a profound influence on L1 retention among immigrant populations, cognitive and psychological mechanisms also play a crucial role in shaping the trajectory of language maintenance or attrition. These internal factors, including memory, executive control, emotional salience, and identity, interact dynamically with external sociolinguistic pressures to determine the degree and nature of L1 decline. Attrition is thus not a passive process of forgetting, but an active reconfiguration of linguistic knowledge influenced by bilingual cognitive architecture (Schmid & Köpke, 2017).

One of the most frequently studied cognitive correlates of L1 attrition is lexical retrieval difficulty. As frequency of use declines, lexical access in L1 becomes slower, more effortful, and prone to error – particularly in spontaneous oral production. Adult immigrants often report increased tip-of-the-tongue (TOT) experiences, lexical substitutions, and reductions in vocabulary range, with dominant L2 items intruding into L1 speech (Schmid, 2011). These disruptions are typically not indicative of permanent loss, but of weakened access pathways, consistent with activation/inhibition models of bilingual memory (Green & Abutalebi, 2013). The Inhibitory Control Model posits that as L2 becomes dominant, L1 must be actively suppressed, resulting in reduced accessibility over time (Green, 1998).

Executive function is central to managing this competition between linguistic systems. Cognitive control mechanisms enable bilingual speakers to navigate between L1 and L2 effectively (Bialystok, 2017). However, when L1 becomes subordinate to L2, reactivation of suppressed grammatical or phonological structures becomes increasingly difficult. This is particularly evident in morphosyntactic domains, where attrited speakers may exhibit syntactic transfer from L2, omission of function words, or morphological simplification (Köpke et al., 2004). Attrition may therefore reflect declining inhibitory control or diminished reinforcement of previously dominant neural pathways (Gollan et al., 2002).

Psychological variables also play a mediating role in language retention. Lexical items and expressions imbued with emotional meaning, such as those tied to family, childhood, or trauma, show notable resistance to attrition (Pavlenko, 2012). Neurocognitive studies have demonstrated greater limbic activation during affective L1 use, suggesting that emotional memory networks act as buffers against lexical decay (Altarriba & Basnight-Brown, 2010). In contrast, if immigrants perceive their L1 as stigmatized, irrelevant, or incompatible with their current social identity, they may experience motivational attrition, wherein psychological distancing from the language accelerates its disuse (Guardado, 2002).

Language dominance further modulates access to L1. As individuals become more proficient and immersed in L2, their internal representations of L1 structures may weaken. Neuroimaging research indicates that attrited speakers engage different brain regions during L1 processing compared to balanced bilinguals, relying more on compensatory or auxiliary networks (Grey et al., 2015; Green & Abutalebi, 2013). These findings underscore the neuroplasticity of bilingual cognition and the susceptibility of underused linguistic systems to restructuring.

Motivational factors related to self-perception and cultural agency are also pivotal. Immigrants who associate their L1 with pride, resilience, or transnational identity are more likely to sustain proficiency (Yilmaz & Schmid, 2018). Conversely, those who internalize deficit discourses – seeing L1 as a hindrance to assimilation or employment – may consciously reduce its use, even in emotionally significant domains (de Bot & Weltens, 1991). Research has shown that self-determined motivation, influenced by social attitudes and personal beliefs, is a strong predictor of language retention or attrition (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Noels et al., 2000).

Importantly, not all cases of attrition result in full erosion of L1 capacity. Psycholinguistic resilience – the ability to sustain linguistic competence despite adverse conditions – varies among individuals based on cognitive flexibility, verbal memory, and strategic engagement with the language. Some immigrants maintain fluency through techniques such as journaling, reading, or speaking to themselves in L1, even in the absence of external reinforcement (Schmid & Mehotcheva, 2012). These behaviors suggest that attrition is not inevitable but is contingent upon both internal capacities and metalinguistic

awareness.

It is worth stating that cognitive and psychological dimensions constitute an essential lens through which to examine L1 attrition in immigrant adults. Far from being a linear loss, attrition is a dynamic, interactive process driven by mechanisms of memory, control, emotion, and identity. These factors operate beneath the surface of observable behavior, shaping the depth, pace, and reversibility of language loss across individuals and contexts. Understanding these dimensions is crucial for developing effective interventions, educational programs, and policies aimed at supporting linguistic diversity in migratory societies.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Research Design

This study employs a comparative, interdisciplinary qualitative research design to investigate L1 attrition among adult immigrants, integrating both psycholinguistic and sociolinguistic frameworks. Drawing on cross-contextual empirical data, the research adopts a multiple case study approach (Yin, 2018), which enables in-depth exploration of how cognitive, emotional, and sociocultural variables interact to influence L1 retention or decline. The design prioritizes naturalistic inquiry, emphasizing participants' lived experiences and the socio-affective conditions surrounding their language use (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Including data from five distinct linguistic communities and host country contexts, the study aims to identify both universal patterns and context-specific dynamics of L1 attrition.

3.2. Participants and Sampling

Participants were selected using purposeful maximum variation sampling to ensure diversity across linguistic, cultural, and geographic variables (Patton, 2015). A total of 50 adult immigrants were recruited from five linguistic communities. They included (1) Spanish-speaking immigrants in the United States (n=10); (2) Russian-speaking immigrants in Germany (n=10); (3) Urdu-speaking immigrants in the United Kingdom (n=10); (4) Mandarin-speaking immigrants in Canada (n=10); (5) Somali-speaking immigrants in Sweden (n=10).

Participants were aged between 30 and 55, had resided in the host country for a minimum of seven years, and reported a functional proficiency in the dominant local language (L2). All participants acquired their L1 in childhood and self-identified as fluent L1 users prior to migration. The sample included individuals with varying levels of education, socioeconomic background, and professional occupation in order to capture a comprehensive view of language use across social domains.

3.3. Data Collection

Data were collected through three primary qualitative methods. firstly, semi-structured interviews (approx. 60 minutes each) were conducted in the participant's L1 to elicit detailed narratives about language use history, identity, emotional connection to L1, and perceived changes in proficiency. Interview prompts were adapted from existing instruments used in attrition research (Schmid, 2011; Yilmaz & Schmid, 2018). Secondary, language use diaries were maintained by participants over a 14-day period, documenting daily use of L1 and L2 across different contexts (e.g., home, work, media, social interactions). These diaries provided insight into frequency, function, and emotional resonance of language use. And thirdly, sociolinguistic background questionnaires captured demographic data, migration history, language acquisition timeline, community involvement, and attitudes toward both L1 and L2.

All data collection instruments were reviewed and adapted in consultation with bilingual experts and community leaders to ensure cultural appropriateness and linguistic accessibility. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Field notes were taken to capture non-verbal cues and contextual factors.

3.4. Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using a thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006), allowing for the identification of patterns across participants and languages. Coding was conducted in two phases. The first phase deals with the initial inductive coding. It recurred the themes related to cognitive (e.g., L1 activation, retrieval difficulty), affective (e.g., emotional salience, identity alignment), and social (e.g., community infrastructure, perceived stigma) dimensions were identified across transcripts and diaries. Then second-cycle theoretical coding was carried out. It coded was organized using frameworks from bilingual memory theory (Green & Abutalebi, 2013), motivational psychology (Noels et al., 2000), and language ecology

(Hornberger, 2002).

NVivo 14 software was used to support coding, query comparisons, and visualization of themes. Cross-case analysis was performed to identify both shared patterns and divergent trajectories across the five language groups and host countries. Particular attention was paid to sociopolitical context, language ideologies, and the presence or absence of supportive community structures.

The validity of findings was strengthened through triangulation of data sources (interviews, diaries, questionnaires), peer debriefing, and member checking with selected participants, who reviewed preliminary findings to confirm interpretive accuracy.

4. Results

Empirical research across diverse immigrant communities has revealed nuanced patterns in the phenomenon of L1 attrition and retention, highlighting significant cognitive, social, and sociopolitical variables that shape the trajectory of linguistic outcomes. These patterns indicate that while L1 attrition is universally influenced by cognitive and psychological mechanisms, its pace and triggers vary considerably across linguistic communities, with sociopolitical factors and community support playing a critical role in the maintenance or decline of L1.

4.1. Cognitive Factors Influencing L1 Attrition

The most consistent cognitive factors contributing to L1 attrition in adult immigrants include the frequency of L1 use, the dominance of the L2, and the age of acquisition. Research on Spanish-speaking immigrants in the United States demonstrates that high levels of daily L1 use, particularly within family networks, significantly mitigate the effects of attrition. Silva-Corvalán's (2014) study in Southern California found that 87% of adult Spanish speakers maintained daily L1 use at home, and only 22% exhibited signs of syntactic or lexical attrition even after more than 15 years of residence. This contrasts with the experiences of Russian immigrants in Germany, where prolonged exposure to a German-dominant environment led to significant linguistic erosion. Köpke and Schmid (2004) observed that over 40% of Russian-speaking adults reported difficulties in lexical retrieval and morphological accuracy after ten years of limited L1 use, particularly among those who migrated after the age of 25. Thus, age of acquisition and the level of exposure to the L2 in the host country are critical cognitive factors in determining the pace of L1 attrition.

Table 1 shows the results related to L1 use frequency and attrition indicators across immigrant communities.

Table 1. L1 Use Frequency and Attrition Indicators across Immigrant Communities.

Community	Frequency of L1 use at home	Attrition indicators	Protective factors
Spanish (US)	87%	22%	Family network, cultural engagement
Russian (Germany)	55%	40%	Limited use at home, late migration
Urdu (UK)	71%	35%	Transnational ties, media consumption
Somali (Sweden)	55%	48%	Community support, religious networks
Mandarin (Canada)	80%	25%	Institutional support, bilingualism

4.2. Social and Emotional Variables in L1 Retention

Social and emotional factors, such as identity, cultural attachment, and community support, are also key determinants of L1 maintenance. In the case of Urdu-speaking immigrants in the United Kingdom, for instance, younger generations tend to prefer English over their heritage language, even in intimate settings, resulting in noticeable attrition. The research of Yagmur and Ehala (2011) found that only 71% of Urdu-speaking adults actively used their L1 at home, and around 35% showed reduced morphological range or syntactic blending with English. However, the linguistic resilience of these speakers was stronger when they maintained transnational ties, including regular visits to Pakistan or consumption of Urdu-language media. This suggests that emotional investment in one's cultural identity and

the availability of community support systems, such as cultural institutions and media, can significantly buffer against L1 erosion.

Further analysis of Somali-speaking communities in Sweden reveals that social networks and religious affiliations play an essential role in L1 maintenance. A number of scholars (Gallo et al., 2021) found that while only 55% of Somali-speaking adults reported consistent use of their L1 at home, those engaged in Somali-speaking mosques or cultural centers exhibited less severe attrition. This highlights the importance of community infrastructure in supporting L1 retention, particularly in immigrant contexts with limited institutional support. Figure 1 demonstrates social and emotional variables in L1 retention among different communities.

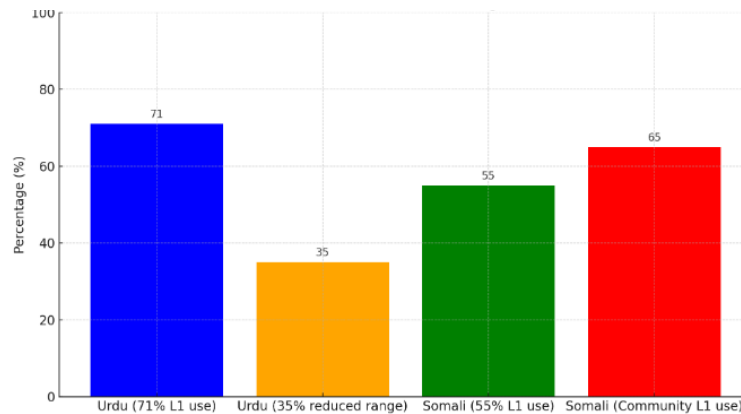


Figure 1. Variables in L1 retention.

4.3. Sociopolitical Contexts and Language Ideologies

The sociopolitical context and language ideologies in host countries also shape the trajectory of L1 attrition. In Canada, Mandarin-speaking immigrants benefit from strong institutional support for multilingualism, including public signage, bilingual schools, and media that promote the use of Mandarin. Li and Duff (2014) report that Mandarin speakers who immigrated as adults retained over 75% of their syntactic fluency even after two decades. Attrition effects in this context were limited primarily to idiomatic expressions and low-frequency lexical items. The presence of bilingual workplaces and governmental support for language diversity played a key role in reducing attrition in Mandarin speakers.

In contrast, Somali-speaking immigrants in Sweden, a country with comparatively fewer resources for language maintenance, face greater challenges in preserving their L1. The absence of Somali-language schools and the predominance of Swedish in civic institutions contribute to higher attrition rates, with 48% of Somali-speaking adults showing signs of lexical loss and borrowing from Swedish (Osman et al., 2020). This underscores the role of national language policies and the availability of institutional support in shaping the maintenance or erosion of immigrant languages. Figure 1 summarizes sociopolitical contexts in language ideologies.

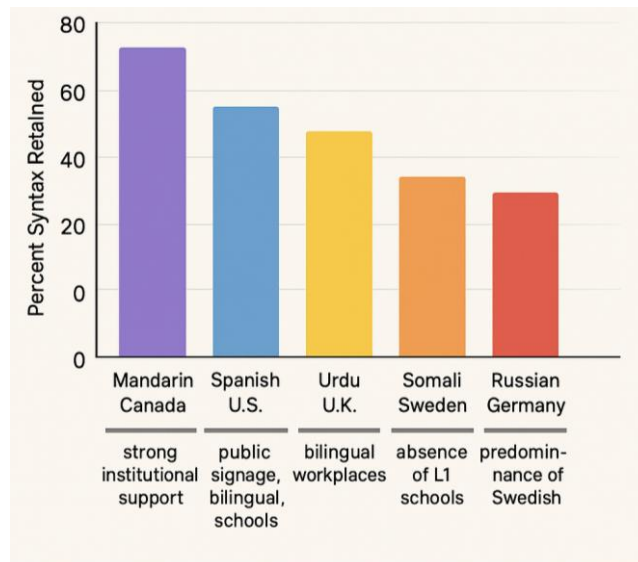


Figure 1. Summary of sociopolitical contexts.

4.4. *Reversibility of L1 Attrition and Conditions for Recovery*

The question of whether L1 attrition is reversible has been addressed through studies examining the conditions under which recovery or maintenance of L1 can occur. Interviews with Polish immigrants in Ireland, for example, revealed that many speakers experienced a “muted internal voice” in Polish after years of exclusive use of English, with a noticeable decline in the ability to express emotional and abstract concepts (Young, 2019). This decline in expressiveness, particularly in affectively rich registers, aligns with findings that passive language maintenance – such as understanding but not actively producing the language – can lead to erosion in areas of emotional depth and metaphoric expressiveness (Schmid, 2011).

However, when immigrants re-engage with their L1 through structured activities, such as religious services, cultural events, or family language policies, recovery of certain linguistic aspects is possible. Studies on intergenerational language transmission show that adult immigrants who enforce L1 use at home and maintain heritage language practices can retain functional fluency, even if some degree of grammatical simplification or code-switching occurs (Guardado, 2002). This suggests that while L1 attrition can be partly reversible, it requires active engagement with the language in specific social and emotional contexts.

The results of this research indicate that L1 attrition in adult immigrants is shaped by a complex interplay of cognitive, social, and sociopolitical factors. Cognitive factors such as frequency of L1 use, L2 dominance, and age of acquisition are key predictors of linguistic outcomes, with high levels of L1 use and early migration age acting as protective factors. Social variables, including emotional attachment to one’s cultural identity and the presence of supportive community networks, significantly influence L1 retention. Sociopolitical contexts, particularly the availability of institutional support for multilingualism, further mediate attrition patterns. Finally, while L1 attrition can be partially reversible, sustained engagement with the language through family policies, cultural institutions, and transnational ties is crucial for supporting its maintenance and recovery.

4. Discussion

The phenomenon of L1 retention and loss within immigrant communities is a subject of significant academic interest, especially given its far-reaching implications for societal integration and inclusion. Language is more than just a means of communication; it serves as a marker of identity, a repository of cultural memory, and a tool for active participation in civic life. As such, the loss of L1, particularly among adult immigrants, extends beyond the personal level and influences intergenerational transmission, social cohesion, and the acceptance of linguistic diversity in public spaces (Bialystok, 2017). The retention or loss of L1 in immigrant populations requires a reconsideration of societal attitudes towards language and belonging.

The existing evidence suggests that the retention of L1 is crucial not only for maintaining cultural heritage but also for promoting cognitive and social well-being. Contrary to the prevailing assimilationist ideologies, which often equate successful integration with

proficiency in the dominant language, multilingualism has been found to provide significant cognitive advantages. These benefits include enhanced executive control, cognitive flexibility, and improved interpersonal relationships (Bialystok, 2017). Such advantages extend beyond the individual, contributing to the broader social fabric. This recognition of the value of multilingualism calls for a reevaluation of policies that prioritize monolingualism as a marker of success.

However, immigrants often find themselves navigating competing pressures that shape their language choices. On one hand, the necessity to learn and use the host country's dominant language is often seen as essential for economic survival and social integration. On the other hand, the lack of institutional and community support for L1 maintenance often leads to attrition, creating a form of linguistic inequity (Piller, 2016). This inequity not only limits the linguistic resources available to immigrants but also undermines their sense of identity, as the absence of support systems for L1 retention reinforces the idea that their native language is a barrier rather than a resource.

Governments and educational institutions play a critical role in addressing this inequity. Policies that support community language programs, adult heritage classes, and multilingual public resources are essential for fostering L1 retention (De Mejía, 2002). Furthermore, reframing heritage languages as valuable cultural assets rather than obstacles to integration can encourage their use and vitality within immigrant communities. When L1 is viewed as a resource, it opens up opportunities for immigrants to contribute meaningfully to society, particularly in translation, education, and cultural advocacy roles (Piller, 2016). Such initiatives have the potential to shift the narrative around language diversity, emphasizing its social and cultural importance rather than its potential for division.

In addition to institutional support, family and community-based approaches also play a pivotal role in L1 retention. Policies that support bilingual childrearing not only benefit children but also create shared linguistic goals across generations, reinforcing the value of L1 in immigrant communities. When immigrant parents see their language reflected in school curricula, public signage, and cultural spaces, they are more likely to feel that their L1 is worth maintaining (Cummins, 2005). This sense of validation enhances self-esteem and encourages continued language use, particularly in communities that have faced linguistic marginalization.

Ultimately, the loss of L1 fluency in adult immigrants is not merely a cognitive shift but a reflection of broader social dynamics. This shift is often influenced by the availability of resources, opportunities, and social recognition, highlighting the need for policies that actively support linguistic diversity. Protecting L1 retention is not just an act of preserving cultural heritage; it is a matter of social justice. It affirms the right of individuals to live in multiple linguistic worlds without sacrificing the richness of their identity (Fishman, 1991). Ensuring that immigrant adults retain their L1 is thus a step toward a more inclusive and equitable society.

5. Conclusions

This study examined the multifaceted factors contributing to L1 attrition in adult immigrants, addressing cognitive, social, emotional, and sociopolitical variables that influence the process.

The cognitive factors identified as most significant to L1 attrition include the frequency of L1 use, L2 dominance, and the age of L2 acquisition. Immigrants who frequently use the L2 in their daily lives tend to experience a faster erosion of their L1, as L2 becomes more dominant. Additionally, individuals who acquire L2 later in life are less likely to experience severe L1 attrition compared to those who learn L2 earlier, likely due to differences in brain plasticity and language processing patterns. The dominance of L2 in adulthood often leads to L1 becoming less accessible and less frequently used, accelerating its attrition.

Social and emotional variables also play a pivotal role in L1 retention. Strong emotional ties to one's heritage language and culture often encourage immigrants to maintain their L1. The sense of cultural attachment and the importance of L1 in preserving identity are key factors in its continued use. Furthermore, the support provided by immigrant communities, where the L1 is spoken and celebrated, helps to counter the pressures of language loss. Communities that encourage the use of multiple languages support both the cognitive and emotional aspects of L1 retention, offering a space for immigrants to express themselves in their native languages.

Sociopolitical contexts and language ideologies in host countries significantly affect the trajectory of L1 attrition. Countries that adopt assimilationist policies, where proficiency in

the dominant language is prioritized, often contribute to the erosion of immigrant languages. Conversely, in countries that embrace multilingualism and cultural diversity, the retention of L1 is more supported, as immigrants feel less compelled to abandon their native languages for social acceptance.

Finally, L1 attrition is not necessarily irreversible. With the right support, such as access to language classes, community-based programs, and a societal shift towards valuing multilingualism, L1 recovery is possible. Ensuring that immigrants have the opportunity to engage with their L1 in meaningful ways, both formally and informally, plays a crucial role in maintaining linguistic diversity. By creating an environment that encourages the use of multiple languages, societies can help immigrants preserve their L1 while also promoting their integration and social inclusion.

The attrition of L1 in adult immigrants is influenced by a range of cognitive, social, emotional, and sociopolitical factors. Addressing these factors through supportive policies and community structures can help mitigate the loss of L1 and promote the maintenance of linguistic diversity in immigrant populations.

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