

PICKING UP THE THREADS:

FIRST LANGUAGE ATTRITION AND PROFESSIONAL RE-IMMERSION

Monika S. Schmid

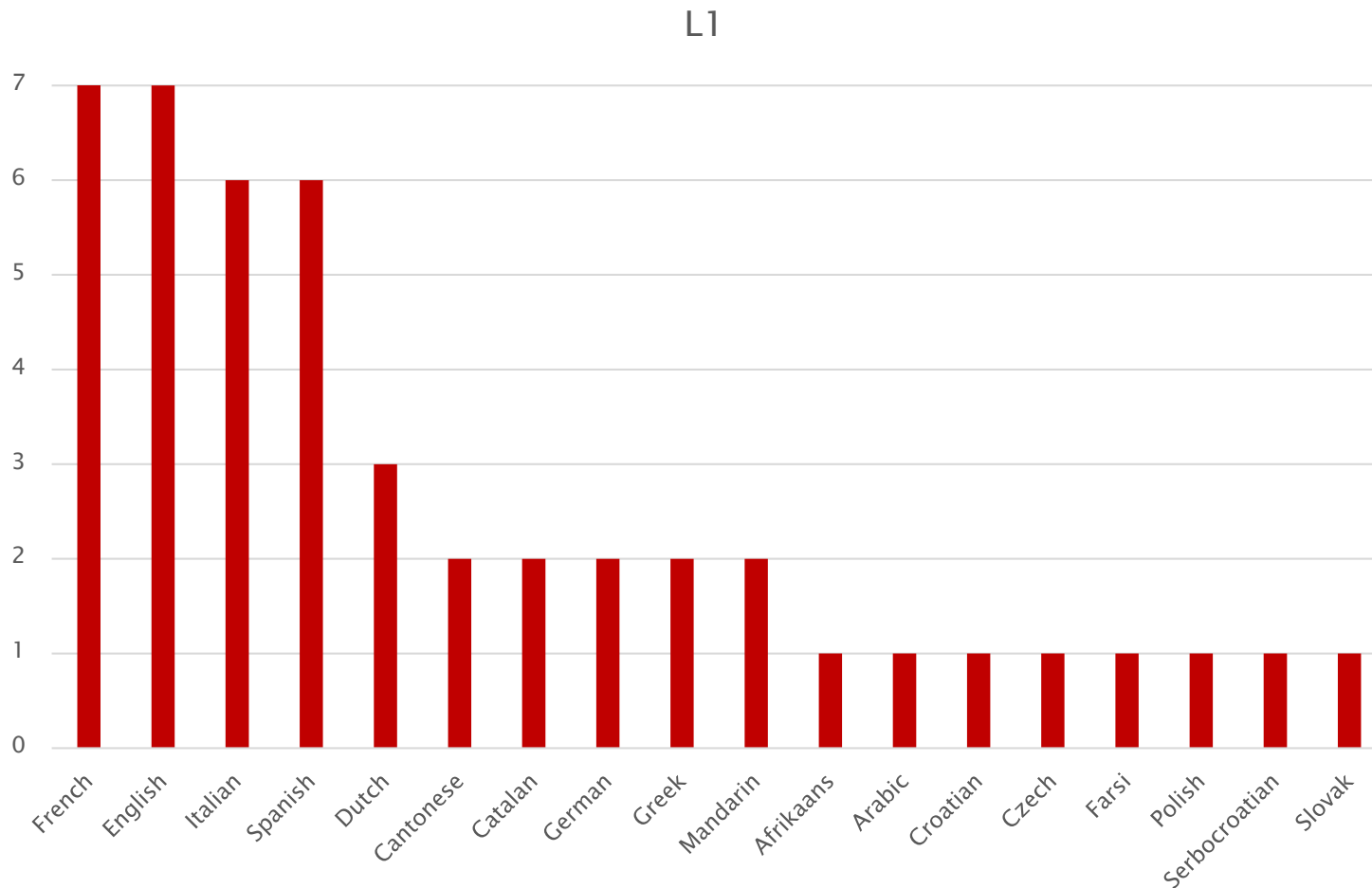
Centre for Research in Language Development
throughout the Lifespan, University of Essex

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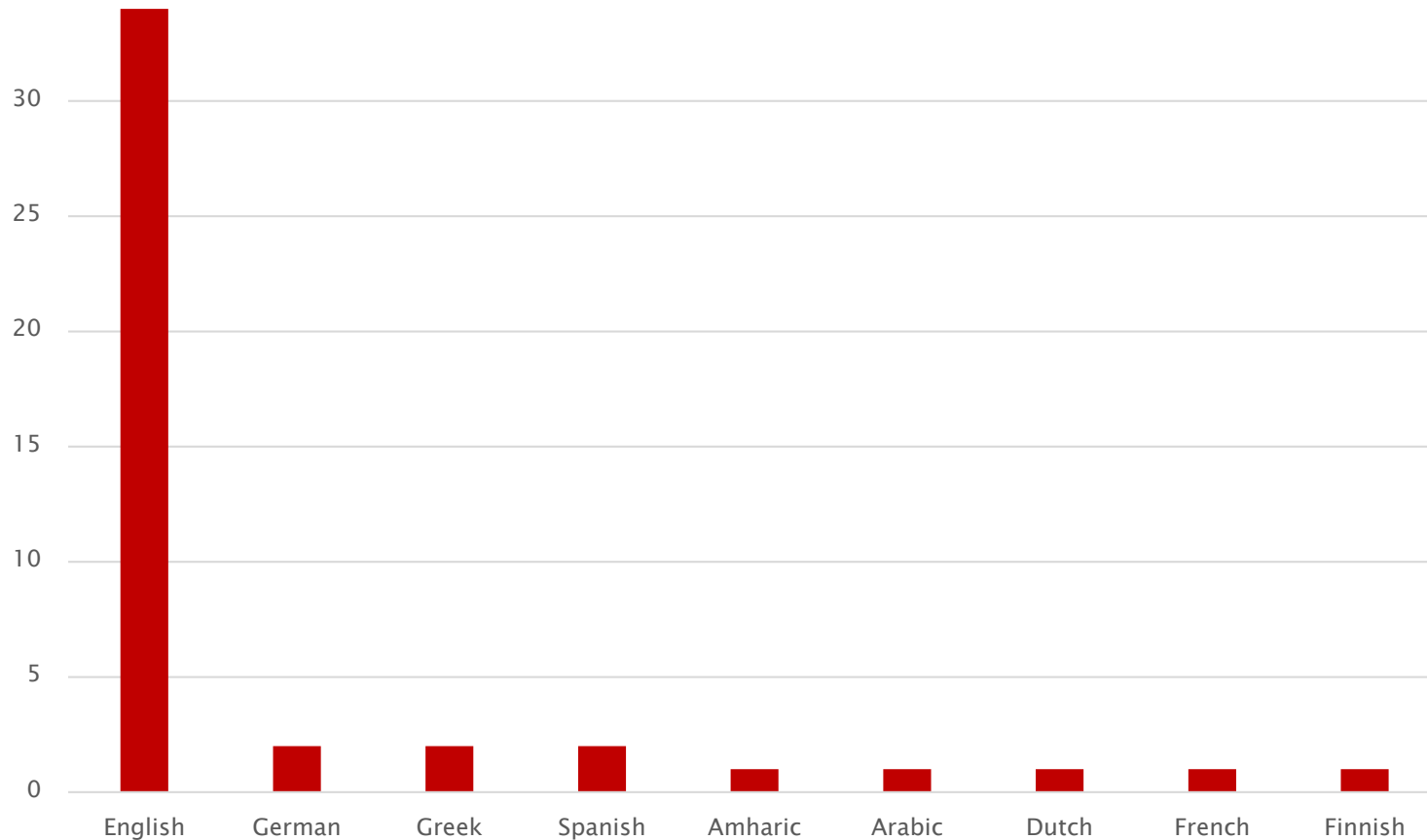
 [@MonikaSSchmid](https://twitter.com/MonikaSSchmid)

A VERY MULTILINGUAL AUDIENCE



A VERY MULTILINGUAL AUDIENCE

L2



A VERY MULTILINGUAL AUDIENCE

- percentage of attendants who report that their L1 is their strongest language (or one of their strongest languages)
 - 81%%
- percentage of attendants who report using a second language in their professional daily lives
 - 81%



TRANSFER OF SKILLS BETWEEN LANGUAGES

- the paradox of professional migrants:
 - we are aware that we need to learn the language skills underpinning professional skills acquired in a native language (L1)
 - but if training and experience was done only in a second language (L2), we tend to assume we can also do it in our L1
- being a native speaker is regarded as a kind of 'birthright'



TRANSFER OF SKILLS BETWEEN LANGUAGES

- there are three problems with this assumption:
 - specialised skills do not develop by themselves
 - general skills may erode over time, due to non-use (L1 attrition)
 - languages change, so even intact knowledge may no longer be up to date



WHAT IS L1 ATTRITION?

“Mma Ramotswe had once come across somebody who had forgotten his Setswana, and she had been astonished, and shocked. This person had gone to live in Mozambique as a young man [...].

When he came back to Botswana, thirty years later, it seemed as if he were a foreigner [...]. To lose your own language was like forgetting your mother, and as sad, in a way. We must not lose Setswana, she thought, even if we speak a great deal of English these days, because that would be like losing part of one's soul.”

(Alexander McCall Smith. *The Full Cupboard of Life*)

ATTRITION 'IN THE WILD, PART 1

- Olympic boxer Regilio Tuur
- native speaker of Dutch
- moved to New York in 1988 (aged 21)
- 2014: participated in Dutch TV show *Sterren Springen*



Regilio Tuur

ATTRITION 'IN THE WILD', PART 2

- tennis player Stefanie Graf
- born and raised in Germany
- moved to US in 2000 (age 33)
upon marrying English native
speaker (Andre Agassi)
- media award ceremony in 2007



Stefanie Graf



ATTITUDES TO ATTRITION

- many people believe that attrition does not exist but is an affectation
- people who are publicly seen to have experienced L1 attrition are usually mocked and/or insulted on social media (the comments about Tuur on Twitter were not pretty...)



ATTITUDES TO ATTRITION



The joys and benefits of bilingualism *Tobias Jones*

20.1.2018

More than half the world's population is now bilingual. Now thought to encourage flexibility of mind and empathy, bilingualism is also transforming societies



ATTITUDES TO ATTRITION



 2h ago

4 

I live in Brittany. My wife does not speak any English apart from "I love you" and "Shut up!". I find it very difficult when I have to speak English as it is very very rare. I too tend to drop in French words when I do speak English.

→ [Reply](#) < [Share](#)

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ATTITUDES TO ATTRITION



[Redacted]



[Redacted]

21 Jan 2018 10:36



4



Firstly why should he?

Secondly - it's very believable. I have a relative who has resided in the Netherlands for over 40 years. She inadvertently uses Dutch vocabulary mid conversation occasionally. As does my Vietnamese wife.

 **Share**

Report



ATTITUDES TO ATTRITION



Losing your first language? Here's how to rediscover your voice

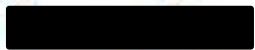
Monika Schmid

3.4.2018

Expats are often shaky in their mother tongue. But fear not: the fight in the brain known as language attrition can be stopped

● Monika Schmid is a professor in linguistics at the University of Essex

ATTITUDES TO ATTRITION



4m ago

0 ↑

This whole article is utter nonsense.

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ATTITUDES TO ATTRITION



[Redacted]



[Redacted]

4h ago

12 ↑

[Redacted], what makes you say that? I recognise myself in this article having lived in the UK for the last 15 years and rarely getting to speak my native French saved for the odd call to family or my yearly week in my hometown. Once in a blue moon, I may have to exchange emails with a French client and I just dread those times as I have lost all confidence in my spelling which used to be top notch. Worse, my syntax has become abysmal and let's not get started on conjugating verbs properly. So no, I don't think this article is "utter nonsense". But I would be keen to understand why that's your opinion on the article.

↪ Reply < Share

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ATTITUDES TO ATTRITION



[Redacted]



[Redacted]

4h ago

7 ↑

My grandfather's experience with his native tongue squares well with the article.
My Polish barber's experience with her native tongue squares well with the article.

→ Reply < Share

Report



[Redacted]



[Redacted]

4h ago

4 ↑

Really? What's your basis for that claim? I ask because I recognise a lot of what happened to my Dad's command of his original language in the article.

→ Reply < Share

Report



ATTITUDES TO ATTRITION



██████████ → ██████████ 4h ago

3 ↑

Why do you say that ? Do you not speak any other languages ? Believe me when I say that each language has its own thought-lines and attitudes. Even if those of us who speak several (me 3, my wife 5) & who switch easily from one to the other are acutely aware that we are changing our "thought-paths", like going over points on a railway - you can't think in French and speak English, for example. In my personal case, after 40 years of rarely using English with native speakers, like the author I often wonder whether what I'm saying is correct & what native speakers would say.

→ Reply < Share

Report



ATTITUDES TO ATTRITION



[Redacted]

[Redacted]

4h ago

1 ↑

t

Ok . I live in the reverse. I never ever speak English . I do read English in the Guardian.

Most of my official writing is in French. Ok I hate it and use Open Office to correct me.

I have 100% confidence in writing English. I have never lost that. Speaking English takes a short time of correction. If I telephone the UK for official reasons I may be not confident but then I quickly drop into the local accent and **my English is perfect.**

The author suggested that English or European citizens may encounter difficulties. I do not think so.

I had a good friend who was fluent in English, French, German, Spanish and Italian. For a few minutes she got confused when changing countries because she thought in the previous language. The brain need a short time to switch.

I think all day in French except when I come on the Guardian.

→ Reply < Share

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ATTITUDES TO ATTRITION



[Redacted]

[Redacted]

4h ago

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ATTITUDES TO ATTRITION

  →  4h ago 1 ↑



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  4m ago 0 ↑

This whole article is utter nonsense.

→ Reply < Share

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  2h ago 4 ↑

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ATTITUDES TO ATTRITION


 [redacted] → [redacted] 4h ago 1 ↑

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→ Reply < Share

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all three
comments were
made by the
same person!!

ATTITUDES TO ATTRITION

- many people believe that attrition does not exist but is an affectation
- ... including people who, two months earlier, claimed to experience it themselves...
- what chance have we got...?



WHAT TO EXPECT WHEN YOU'RE ATTRITING

- you may produce:
 - sentences that go badly wrong
 - very disfluent speech (pauses, hesitations, *uhm* etc.)
 - borrowings and switches
 - inappropriate language (request-making, politeness)
 - a more or less pronounced foreign accent
 - very weird expressions



WHY IS THIS A PROBLEM?

- we gauge other people's functioning (cognitive skills, intellect, capability, ...) based on how they speak
- this has a big impact for L2 users
- but it can also be a problem in the native language



FLUENCY AND HESITATION

- all naturalistic spoken speech has disfluencies (pauses, *erm*, fillers such as 'like', 'you know' etc.)
- not all of these are indicative of problems of retrieval or speech production (they also structure the message)
- attriters use more hesitations, some of them in places where monolinguals don't
 - appear less confident (and, therefore, less competent)



VOCABULARY

- attriters tend to overuse more frequent words and underuse rarer ('more sophisticated') ones
- a broad vocabulary is often used to 'dazzle' and create an impression of expertise
- appear less expert and less intelligent



GRAMMAR

- attriters sometimes have a preference for ‘more straightforward’ grammatical structures
- main clauses instead of subordinate ones
 - can reduce the processing load (easier to keep track)
 - some languages have different word order in main and subordinate clauses (easier to stick to one pattern)
- “John was tired. He went home.”
- “John went home because he was tired.”
- can create impression of less analytic/strategic thinking

GRAMMAR

- attriters sometimes have a preference for ‘more straightforward’ grammatical structures
- overt vs. null pronouns
 - “Where is John?” – “He’s at the hotel.”
 - “¿Dónde está Juan?” “Está en el hotel.” (lit.: “Is at the hotel.”)
 - “¿Dónde está Juan?” “Él está en el hotel.”
- overt pronoun would not be used unless contrastive or emphatic
- attriters have tendency to overuse pronouns where monolinguals wouldn’t
- can create impression of overstating the obvious, not being attuned to informational needs of interlocutor



WEIRD THINGS MIGRANTS SAY

- structures and idiomatic expressions are literally translated:
 - English: *to run for office, to run short of something*
 - Spanish: **correr para gobernador*
 - German: **ich renne kurz an Briefpapier*



MORE SUBTLE ASPECTS OF ATTRITION

- attrition does not just concern vocabulary, accuracy or fluency
- each language has its own conventions and (mostly) unwritten rules on how to interact
- for example: familiar and polite pronouns (the T–V distinction)
- many languages make this distinction



PRONOUNS OF ADDRESS

English	French	German	Spanish	Dutch
I	je	ich	yo	ik
you	tu	du	tú	jij
he, she, it	il, elle	er, sie, es	él, ella	hij, zij, het
we	nous	wir	nosotros	wij
you	vous	ihr	vosotros	jullie
they	ils/elles	sie	ellos, ellas	zij

PRONOUNS OF ADDRESS

English	French	German	Spanish	Dutch
I	je	ich	yo	ik
you ^{informal}	tu	du	tú	jij
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PRONOUNS OF ADDRESS

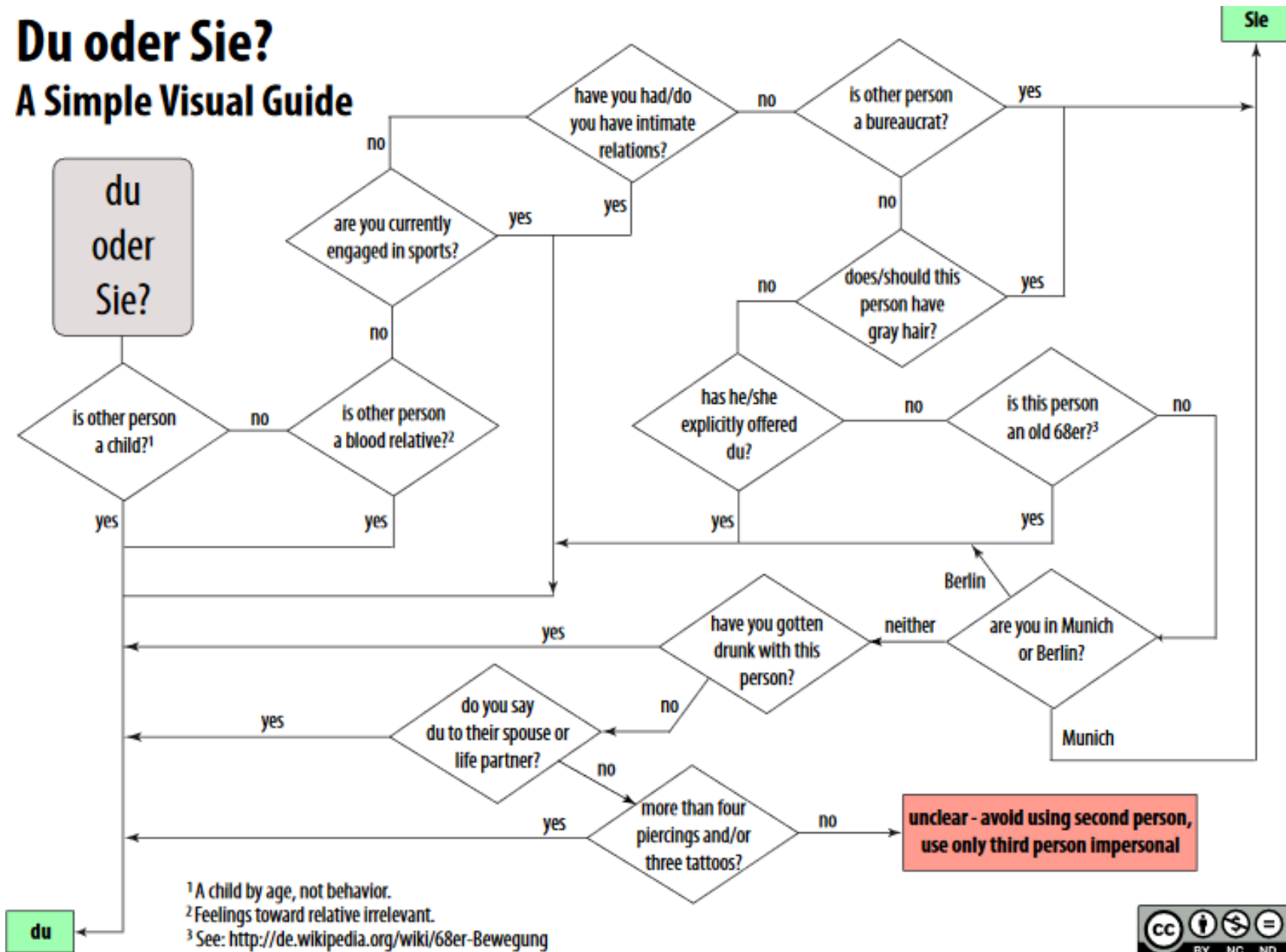
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they	ils/elles	sie	vosotros	zij
			ellos, ellas	
			ustedes	

WHEN TO USE THESE PRONOUNS

- ... it's complicated!
- e.g. German:

Du oder Sie?

A Simple Visual Guide



WHEN TO USE THESE PRONOUNS

- ... it's complicated!
- e.g. Dutch:
 - many people use formal pronoun to address grandparents and parents (unthinkable in German, linked to age and background)
 - married couple: he addresses his own parents with formal pronoun, she addresses her in-laws with informal
- e.g. French:
 - Simone de Beauvoir, *Les Mandarins*: husband uses *tu* to wife, she uses *vous* to him



WHEN TO USE THESE PRONOUNS

- can be difficult even for monolinguals
- tricky for attriters for three reasons:
 - we have changed (we are older than when we left, may have different social position)
 - our language has changed (we are used to the conventions of our second language)
 - the language of our home country has changed (many languages have trend towards more use of informal)
- however, getting it wrong can be disastrous!



EVEN MORE SUBTLE ASPECTS OF ATTRITION

- politeness isn't just a matter of pronouns, of course:

“I can only fall silent because thirty seconds into the conversation, I have already failed at an important task: while I was bowing and saying hello, I was supposed to have been calculating the other person's age, rank, and position in order to determine how polite I should be for the rest of the conversation.”

(Mori, K. 1997. *Polite Lies: On being a woman caught between two cultures*. New York: Henry Holt.)



STILL MORE SUBTLE ASPECTS OF ATTRITION

- we use language to establish relationships and demarcate our roles in these relationships
- choice of style, body language etc. vary depending on which role we are in
- we learn how to project a professional persona due to experience (most of us have never been taught this)
- it is a dangerous fallacy to assume such knowledge translates between languages!



MORE STILL MORE SUBTLE ASPECTS OF ATTRITION

- styles and conventions of (professional) interaction vary between languages:
 - body space/distance
 - how to make a polite request
 - how to offer to do something
 - ...
- the way this is done in one language can appear rude, pushy, overly ingratiating, ... in another



SO, WHAT SHOULD WE DO...?

- not this!



SO, WHAT SHOULD WE DO...?

- not this!
- nor this!



Terence Cass 4m ago

0 ↑

This whole article is utter nonsense.

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Terence Cass 2h ago

4 ↑

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SO, WHAT SHOULD WE DO...?

- become aware of what is going on
- if you have to write an important letter, ask someone to read it
- if you have to speak your native language in an important setting (e.g. job interview)
 - rehearse the situation
 - if possible, immerse yourself in the language for a few days beforehand
- don't be afraid to say if you cannot remember a word or are unsure what it means



SO, WHAT SHOULD WE DO...?

- ... and if people still don't believe you, send them here:

<https://languageattrition.org>

www.facebook.com/languageattrition

