

# Losing a first language to a second language

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When you're a teenager you have so many other concerns,  
and, [my first language] just sort of slipped away  
and I didn't realize what I had lost until it was gone.

(Greta, who immigrated to Canada from the Netherlands as a child)

(Kouritzin, 1999: 171)

## 29.1 Introduction

The loss of one's native language seems more distressing than the loss of a later learned language. The native language is inextricably linked to one's history and sense of self. Even more than that, it is most often tied to associations with family, tradition, culture, and heritage, making it an integral part of one's identity. Indeed, the shift in language dominance to a later learned language has sometimes been described by people who have undergone it as a shift in personality or self-identification (e.g., Kouritzin, 1999). Sometimes the suppression of the native language is intentional, as in the case of immigrants who want to assimilate as quickly as possible into the new society (e.g., Isurin, 2005) or in the case of strong societal pressures against speaking one's native language (Schmid, 2002). Other cases of first language loss are unintentional. Children adopted from abroad often join a community in which there are no other speakers who share their native language (Isurin, 2005; Nicoladis & Grabois, 2002). Even those who grow up in a family environment where the native language continues to be spoken may feel that the maintenance of the language is automatic, only to find later in adulthood that, without continuous exposure, much of their prior ability in that language has been lost (Kouritzin, 1999).

Research on first language attrition has seen a rapid increase in the past twenty years, investigating a wide range of situations in which attrition