This experimental study investigates attrition in native Catalan influenced by near-native English (White and Genesee 1996). The theoretical issue addressed is the effects of attrition on the interpretable – uninterpretable feature distinction. Tsimpli, Sorace, Heycock and Filiaci (Universities of Edinburgh and of Thessaloniki ms) claim that attrition affects the grammatical options provided by different parametric settings between languages, rather than the parameters themselves. The hypothesis underlying their claim is that syntactic attrition may affect interpretable features at the syntax – discourse interface, which entails more ambiguity in interpretation since conflicting options for the native and near-native language will be available at the interface. In contrast, uninterpretable features are inaccessible and thus attrition will not affect the structural aspects that they regulate. Contrasting patterns of data, however, with different interpretable features related to different structural configurations, specifically, syntactic subjects, that-clauses and noun-adjective agreement patterns, reveal that the claim is too strong and that what is required is a more fine-grained distinction among interpretable features in order to determine the effects of syntactic attrition on individual interpretable features.

First, following Tsimpli, Sorace, Heycock and Filiaci’s (Universities of Edinburgh and of Thessaloniki ms) methodological design, the interpretable – uninterpretable feature distinction characteristic of syntactic subjects in data from an experimental group (native speakers of Catalan with near-native command of English) and a control group (Catalan native speakers with little or no knowledge of English) is examined. The null subject parameter affects the distribution and interpretation of syntactic subjects by providing grammatical options used to achieve various semantic and pragmatic effects, specifically, null or overt and preverbal or postverbal subjects. Catalan, set positively for the null subject parameter, allows null subjects in finite clauses (ha marxat), but English, set negatively, does not. For the same reason, Catalan allows postverbal subjects (ha marxat el Pere) and English does not (Rizzi 1982). In languages with a positive setting, the null subject is the default option and the overt pronoun the marked option (Montalbetti 1984). Preverbal or postverbal subject position is aligned with interpretative differences regulated by the interpretable features of topic and focus. With respect to the null subject parameter, the options of null or overt and preverbal or postverbal subjects in native Catalan should remain available under the effect of near-native English because they are syntactic in nature and the result of an uninterpretable feature. In contrast, attrition should affect the distribution and interpretation of overt Catalan pronominal subjects since they are regulated by the interpretable topic – shift and focus features and thus in attrited Catalan the relevant interpretable features on overt pronominal subjects become unspecified and the subjects will then not necessarily be interpreted as shifted topics or foci. Finally, the occurrence of preverbal subjects should increase in the Catalan of the experimental speakers given that English requires preverbal subjects. The hypothesis is tested by means of two tasks, a production task and an interpretation task. The production task entails ordering a definite or indefinite subject, a verb and an adverbial as depicted in a newspaper photo and the cue “Has sentit que” (Have you heard that …).

(1) … es va disputar un torneig de polo en un camp de Barcelona?
‘a polo match was played in a field of Barcelona’

The results corroborate the prediction regarding the effects of near-native English on native Catalan. The experimental group selects more preverbal subjects than the
control group, whereas selection of postverbal subjects prevails in the latter group. The interpretation task focuses on the interpretation of indefinite subjects in a context such as in (2a) and a second sentence, as in the two options provided in (2b), to denote an event which may or may not contain a referent in the first sentence depending upon how the preverbal or postverbal subject is interpreted and matched with a corresponding picture:

(2)  
   a. *Els veïns de la primera planta tenen dos gats.*  
      the neighbors on the first floor have two cats’  
   b. *(un gat) es va escapar ahir nit (un gat).*  
      ‘a cat ran away last night’

The data of the experimental group show an attrited level of interpretation compared to that of the control group on this task.

Next, following Delfitto (Università di Verona ms), the C-head of that-clauses can be computationally specified as P(roposition), F(act) or E(vent) under a sisterhood relation with a predicate endowed with the correct subcategorization features. The C-head of a that-clause complement gets specified as +P under a sisterhood relation with a verb like creure (to believe), as +E under a sisterhood relation with a verb like succeir (to happen) and as +F under a sisterhood relation with a verb like demostrar (to show), as illustrated in the examples in (3):

(3)  
   a. *Crec que el metge ha arribat.*  
      (I) believe that[+P] the doctor has-subj arrived  
   b. *Ha succeït que una bomba ha esclatat.*  
      has happened that[+E] a bomb exploded  
   c. *Han demostrat que el ministre és corrupit.*  
      (they) have shown that[+F] the minister is corrupt.

The results of a production task, in which the subjects are provided with a main clause and select the appropriate embedded clause among different possibilities by means of matching the appropriate features, and an interpretation task, in which the subjects match the interpretation of examples such as those in (3) depicted as event, proposition or fact represented in the embedded clause, are markedly different for the experimental and control groups, showing that attrition affects the interpretable features characteristic of complementizers.

Finally, as example (4) shows, the interpretable feature of number is crucial to the derivation of noun-adjective agreement configurations in a language like Catalan, but not in English:

(4)  
   a. *Els gats negres estan a la cuina.*  
      The-masc-pl cats-mas-pl black-mas-pl are in the kitchen.  
   b. *Les gtes atigrades estan dormint.*  
      The-fem-pl cats-fem-pl black-fem-pl are sleeping.

The results of two tasks, a production task, in which the subjects provide agreement markers according to a depicted context, and an interpretation task, in which the subjects match depicted adjectives to nouns, show that the experimental and control subjects produce and interpret these patterns of data in nearly identical terms. It is thus shown that attrition does not affect the interpretable feature of number. In conclusion, certain interpretable features, such as number, seem not to be sensitive to attrition in native Catalan under the influence of near-native English. In contrast, other interpretable features, such as those specified for the C-head of that clauses and for the pragmatic effects related to the null subject parameter, are shown to be sensitive to attrition effects. These facts suggest that a more fine-grained approach to the effects of attrition on individual interpretable features is required.