

KEY CONCEPTS*

A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO THE FOSSILIZATION HYPOTHESIS

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*This is a new regular feature which aims at providing a concise (approximately 1000 words) overview / introduction to an area relevant to English teaching in China. The inaugural piece below examines a key element of Second Language Acquisition theory using examples from Chinese; in the next issue, English for Medical Purposes, and the situation in China, will be the focus. The list of possible topics is almost endless. However, if you are interested in submitting a Key Concepts article, please bear in mind that you should show China relevance. You are advised to contact the Editors in the first instance to confirm the suitability of topic.

Fossilization, a founding concept in Second Language Acquisition (SLA), is the phenomenon that all adult learners, at some point in the process of learning a second language, stop progressing before they reach a native-like level of proficiency and syntactic accuracy, regardless of age, personal motivation, the amount of exposure to the target language, and instruction received. One of the seminal fossilization hypotheses was set up over forty years ago by Selinker (1972) where he claimed that it is inevitable for second language acquisition to fall short of complete attainment of the target language and certain deviances from the target language norms stay rather permanent in the learner's interlanguage system. He also emphasized that the main empirical domain of fossilization was limited to spontaneous production of the target language, meaning fossilization focuses on learners' meaningful performance instead of performance of drills.

Research on fossilization during the last forty years has been trying to answer several questions raised by Selinker and Lamendella in their 1978 paper, such as the

nature of fossilization and the objects of fossilization (Han, 2013). What would interest and concern language teachers the most, among these intriguing questions, are probably the objects of fossilization (i.e. linguistic features prone to fossilization) given that language teachers would want to possibly foresee fossilizable linguistic features and strategize their teaching techniques so as to delay fossilization and to prolong the progression of their students' learning process.

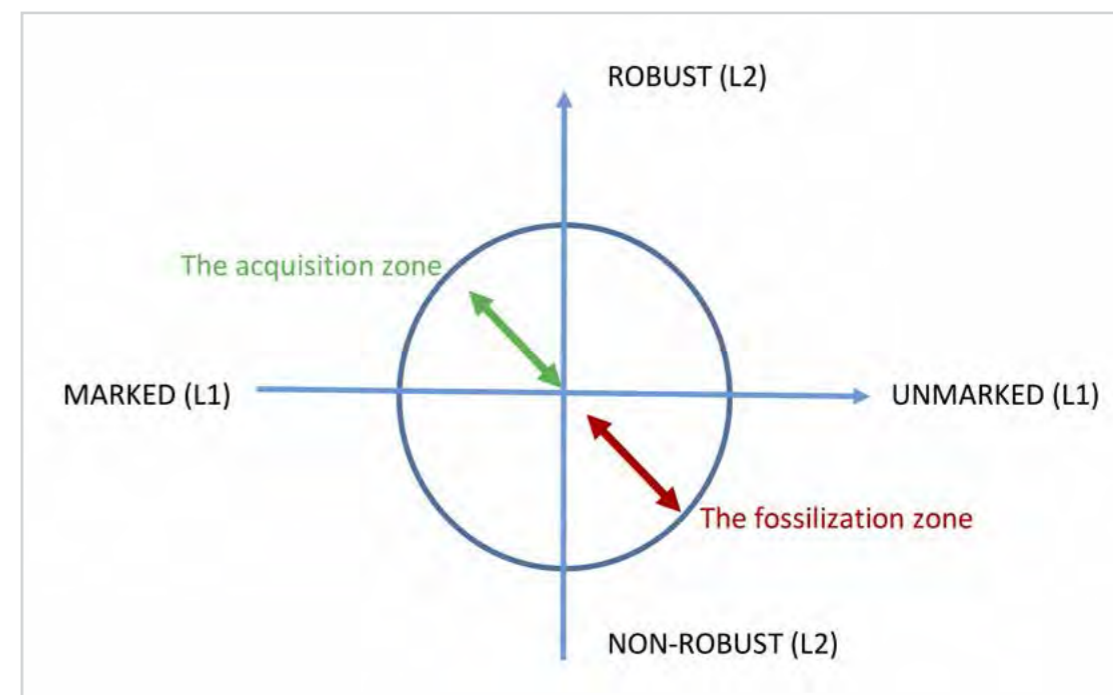
Given that fossilization has been observed to be extremely selective in the manners of intra-learner selectivity (i.e. same learner acquiring certain features over others) and inter-learner variability (i.e. different learners acquiring different features), the most recent research done on fossilization has been focused on addressing this issue of the selectivity of fossilization. Among many analytic models recently seen, the Selective Fossilization Hypothesis is considered the most general and inclusive one (Han, 2009; Han, 2013).

The Selective Fossilization

Hypothesis (SFH) tries to explain how the two core variables in SLA, learners' L1 influence and the target language input, interact to exert influence on learners' acquisition and, for that matter, on the fossilization of their acquisition. SFH places both variables on a continuum with L1 influence ranging from marked to unmarked and L2 input from non-robust to robust.

L1 markedness is determined by how frequently a specific linguistic feature is used and how variable (i.e. consistent) it is in the L1. An infrequent and variable linguistic feature is labeled marked and the opposite, being frequent and invariable, is unmarked. Unmarked features are the ones used most naturally and, therefore, most likely to be carried over to the learner's interlanguage system (i.e. features learners are like likely to 'fall back' onto if the target linguistic features are syntactically different).

The robustness of the L2 input is labeled with the same two sub-variables, i.e. an infrequent and variable linguistic feature in the target language is considered ▶



▲ Figure 1. Selective Fossilization Hypothesis (Han, 2009)

Target Language [English]	'With his sister, he went to the hospital.' 'He went to the hospital with his sister.' The prepositional phrase of manner can be placed before or after [subject + predicate].	Frequent + Variable ↓ Quite Robust (i.e. not completely robust) Target Language Input
L1 [Chinese]	'他和他姐姐*去了医院.' tā hé jiě jie qù le yī yuàn (He with his sister went to the hospital.) * This is treated as a prepositional phrase here instead of as part of the subject. The prepositional phrase of manner is placed in between subject and predicate.	Frequent + Invariable ↓ Unmarked L1 Influence
Interlanguage	'He with his sister went to the hospital.' A Chinese learner of English is likely to place the prepositional phrase of manner in between the subject and the predicate when producing English.	Likely to be fossilized

▲ Table 1. Analysis of the use of the prepositional phrase of manner for Chinese learners of English

non-robust and a frequent and invariable one would be robust. Non-robust features in the target language are usually the ones learners find difficult to generalize due to the low frequency and inconsistency in use.

Therefore, as shown in Figure 1, the most acquirable linguistic features to second language learners are the ones that are marked in their L1 with a robust correspondence in the target language. On the other hand, linguistic features that are unmarked in the L1 with a non-robust correspondence in the target language are more likely to be fossilized.

For example, as explained in Table 1, to a Chinese learner of English, the use of the prepositional phrase of manner would almost fall into this category. In English, the prepositional phrase of manner, very frequently used, could be placed either before or after subject and predicate. Admittedly, the latter option is significantly more frequently used, but both options are grammatically correct in both

formal and informal English. This means this linguistic feature is frequent yet variable, meaning the input is not completely robust. On the other hand, in Chinese, the prepositional phrase of manner is also used frequently, but is only considered grammatical when placed in between subject and predicate. The variation of placing it after subject and predicate does exist in colloquial Chinese yet this is not considered to be grammatically correct. This means the L1 influence is frequent and invariable, and hence unmarked.

This model seems to enable language teachers and learners to predict the linguistic features most likely to be fossilized (i.e. with unmarked L1 influence and non-robust L2 input) to some extent. However, the main issue that would arise when the attempt of applying this model is made is that no updated research so far has specified how frequency and variability of a linguistic feature could be quantitatively and accurately determined; it seems that in all examples seen (including the one above shown in Table 1) the markedness of L1 influence and the robustness of L2 input have been

determined completely intuitively or subjectively. It is then reasonable to propose that future research is needed to explore the possibility of setting up the criteria for determining the frequency and variability of a specific linguistic feature. ○

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