The Selective Fossilization Hypothesis and its Putative Implications for Second Language Teaching

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Issues of learnability and teachability of linguistic features have long been a core interest in instructed second language acquisition (SLA) research. Following Lyster and Ranta (1998), a great deal of empirical work has approached second language (L2) teachability by investigating the efficacy of all types of corrective feedback (e.g., oral recasts, elicitation, repetition) vis-à-vis the acquisition of L2 English structures such as third-person singular -*s*, past tense ending -*ed*, and the use of first mention *a/an*. That said, the choice of these linguistic targets appears to be quite arbitrary. In other words, they were chosen because they were "thought" to be somewhat unlearnable, often without further explanation as to how the estimated level of learnability was determined. In this light, Han's (2009) Selective Fossilization Hypothesis (SFH) seems promising in informing L2 teaching practices, as it approaches the learnability issue – generally believed to be the flipside of the phenomenon of fossilization – both *a priori* and *a posteriori*.

In a sense, the SFH is an *a posteriori* proposition because the interaction of its two parameters, i.e., first language (L1) markedness and (L2) input robustness, can account for almost all scenarios of acquisition and fossilization on the basis of corpus data that document the L2 (modified) input (e.g., oral recasts) provided to the learner, as well as those that denote the everyday usage of the target structures' counterparts. L2 features that tend to fossilize are those that are non-robust in the L2 input and that have unmarked counterparts in the L1. Each parameter, in turn, is determined by the interaction and relative strength of the subvariables of frequency and variability. This way, the SFH aims to achieve a fine-tuned understanding of the exact interactions involved and their effect on the learnablity / fossilzability of an L2 feature, although there is still a long way to go before the exact formula can be nailed down. As pointed out by Han (2009), for example, should the relationship between L2 input characteristics and probability of fossilization turn out to be non-linear, some of the variables will need to be raised to some power or expressed as having logarithmic functions.

On the other hand, the SFH is also formulated *a priori* because it aims to predict the learnability of L2 morphosyntactic features. From an L2 instructor's perspective, it is only natural to speculate on the SFH's applicability in making predictions about the learnability of features in other linguistic domains. A case in point would be the four-character idioms in L2 Chinese. Each idiom has a specific story packed in its meaning, and an awareness of historical and cultural references unique to Chinese is required for a thorough understanding. Thus, to a native English speaker learning Chinese, these idioms' counterparts are marked as far as L1 English is concerned. Moreover, these idioms can be provided frequently to the learner only to a limited extent due to pragmatic and discourse constraints. Here, the SFH would predict that such four-character idioms would be quite difficult to acquire, considering that they are marked by their L1 counterpart standards, and the frequency of relevant instances of the target structures being presented to the learner is also somewhat constrained. Hence, they are likely to fall near the outer circles of Zone III. Indeed, research (e.g., Hong, 2003) has shown that these idioms are difficult for L2 Chinese learners, and many teachers of Chinese simply forego the task of

teaching idioms and hope that learners will pick them up incidentally (e.g., Zhou & Wang, 2009).

One can imagine that when further developed, the SFH will have more predictive power and thus become more useful in informing second language teaching. In order to work out the analytical formula and test the hypothesis, many more empirical studies will need to be carried out, calling for the collective efforts not only of SLA researchers, but also of L2 instructors.

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