

Studies of Fossilization in Second Language Acquisition

ZhaoHong Han and Terrence Odlin, Eds. Clevedon, England: Multilingual Matters. 2006. Pp. x + 214.

Having systematically examined and evaluated nearly 30 years of research on fossilization in her 2004 volume, *Fossilization in Adult Second Language Acquisition*, ZhaoHong Han, along with co-editor Terrence Odlin, now explores the more current fossilization literature in its sequel, *Studies of Fossilization in Second Language Acquisition*. One might argue that Han and Odlin have taken on an even greater challenge here, as it is no small feat to bring together such a wide variety of perspectives in a volume that is at once integrated and even-handed. That they succeed is no surprise to anyone familiar with their work.

In chapter 1, Han and Odlin open with the question that motivates the book: Are second language learners able to become as proficient and native-like in their L2 as in their L1? This is a question that remains to be answered to everyone's satisfaction. Yet from the hundreds of studies of fossilization that have emerged over the past three decades, two competing views can be identified: Birdsong's (chapter 9) success-driven model, which stresses learner potential and states, in essence, that everything in L2 is learnable, and Han and Odlin's failure-driven model, which focuses on the limitations of the learner and maintains, conversely, that everything in the L2 is not learnable (Han, 2005).

Also included in chapter 1 is a description of Han's three-tiered representation of L2 ultimate attainment. The model includes the *cross-learner level*, which speaks to adult learners' near-universal failure in attaining native-like competence in the L2; the *inter-learner level*, which is characterized by the strikingly broad range of proficiencies (e.g., minimal to virtually native-like) observed among adult L2 learners; and the *intra-learner level*, where differential success on discrete features of the L2 can be observed within a single learner. These distinctions are deemed necessary since they remind us that the L2 end state is neither global nor monolithic as was previously believed.

Chapter 1 continues with a discussion of perceived definitional, conceptual, and methodological shortcomings that have come to be associated with the fossilization research. In response to Long's (2003) observation about the confusion that potentially ensues when fossilization is described variously as a process (*eplanans*) and as a product (*explanandum*) – and sometimes both – Han and Odlin point out that the potential for ambiguity is present in numerous other verbs in English and assert that “the problem of conflating the *eplanans* ... and the *explanandum* ... is hard to avoid when English is the metalanguage used to discuss the theoretical issues” (p. 5). In closing, Han and Odlin provide a concise review of the chapter's key points and lay out the plan of the book.

In chapter 2, Nakuma takes a look at fossilization and L2 attrition and rejects the characterization of either as an observable phenomenon that can be studied empirically or measured quantitatively. He seeks to reconceptualize fossilization and attrition as assumptions or hypotheses about learner behaviors and learning outcomes and reminds us that “not all issues need to be proven empirically in order to influence human existence” (p. 31). In his contribution, Nakuma calls into question the legitimacy of fossilization as an independent field of research and

in doing so raises some thought-provoking questions about the nature of fossilization and second language acquisition.

The idea that both success and failure can coexist within an individual learner's interlanguage at any point during the L2 acquisition process has led Han and Odlin to hypothesize that "fossilization is best thought of in local rather than global terms" (p. 12). Further discussion and empirical evidence of the locally impacted nature of the end state can be found in chapters 3 and 4, where Lardiere and Han report new findings from their respective ongoing longitudinal studies of individual learners. Apart from offering additional evidence of localized fossilization, both studies explore the reliability of grammaticality judgment data relative to naturalistic production data, with encouraging results. Specifically, Lardiere reports that the results of two grammaticality judgment tasks administered 18 months apart "converge" (p. 45) with those of production data collected over a 12-year period. Similarly, Han observes a "broad consistency" (p. 74) between grammaticality judgment and naturalistic data, leading her to conclude that grammaticality judgments can be a reliable source of evidence and a "viable alternative for studying fossilization" (p. 76).

In chapter 5, Odlin, Alonso Alonso, and Alonso-Vázquez present results from their study comparing the effects of transfer on second and third language acquisition. Odlin and his colleagues studied the acquisition of the English present perfect by native and bilingual speakers of Spanish and Galician and, in the process, addressed the practical problem of devising an appropriate methodology for assessing the acquisition of the targeted linguistic structure. Their results include some unexpected findings not only about fossilization in L2 and L3, but about native speaker norms as well. For example, in what proved to be the study's most surprising outcome, native English speakers' performance on a proofreading task designed to elicit attempted corrections using the English present perfect was found to be "hardly different" (p. 93) from that of the two non-native groups. On the whole, the native speakers were found to be surprisingly tolerant of errors involving the present perfect, leading Odlin and his collaborators to conclude that "a satisfactory understanding of native speaker norms, a prerequisite for any thorough account of either stabilization or fossilization, remains to be achieved" (p. 97).

In chapter 6, Lakshmanan takes a look at acquisition and attrition in child second language learning in her reanalysis of interlanguage data originally compiled by Hansen (as cited in chapter 6). Here the child learners are native speakers of English, the L2 is Hindi/Urdu, and the linguistic focus sentential negation in the L2. Lakshmanan's analysis reveals striking similarities in the developmental paths of child and adult L2 learners, but suggests that child learners are ultimately more successful in their acquisition of the targeted linguistic structure. What she perceives as children's greater sensitivity to indirect negative evidence is proposed as one possible explanation for their success. Lakshmanan concludes with some provocative thoughts about monolingual native speaker bias in second language acquisition studies and argues for replacing native speaker norms with simultaneous bilingual speaker norms.

Chapter 7 by MacWhinney explores age-related effects in L2 learning with a focus on the interaction between age of arrival (AoA) and fossilization patterns. With clear explanations and an effective use of analogy, MacWhinney proceeds to explain, define, and evaluate ten possible accounts of fossilization and AoA effects. Of the ten, seven emphasize biological determinants

of AoA effects, and three, psychological. The majority of these hypotheses generate predictions that are inconsistent with observed AoA and fossilization effects, however, and none predict the inter- and intra-learner differences that characterize adult L2 learners. For this reason, MacWhinney proposes two additional hypotheses – the social stratification hypothesis and the compensatory strategies hypothesis – both of which acknowledge the potential influence of social constraints on ultimate attainment in adult SLA.

Tarone in chapter 8 endorses language play as a means to prevent and possibly destabilize fossilized interlanguage forms, though she concedes that evidence supporting the effectiveness of such an approach is largely suggestive. Her observation that SLA researchers can expect to encounter greater difficulty isolating the putative causes of fossilization in adult subjects, whose lives tend to grow more complex over time, is intuitively appealing and perhaps her strongest argument for the socio-psychological approach to SLA research.

In chapter 9, Birdsong, whose views on fossilization are largely in conflict with Han and Odlin's, claims that "the study of fossilization is not without peril" (p. 173) and encourages readers to pursue the more rewarding, though hardly less perilous, study of nativelikeness. Nevertheless, while Birdsong and Han and Odlin may espouse opposing viewpoints (success vs. failure) and methodologies (empirical vs. naturalistic), both sides agree on two important points: (1) that there is neither complete success nor complete failure in SLA, and (2) that both positions are not mutually exclusive, but complementary, as "both are needed to produce a complete picture of the L2 learner" (Birdsong, chapter 9, p. 185).

Chapter 10 concludes with some reflections by Larsen-Freeman on key points discussed in previous chapters and is immediately followed by an "Afterword" from Larry Selinker, who coined the term *fossilization* back in 1972. In this surprisingly personal piece we learn that it was Selinker's immigrant grandmother and her ongoing struggles with English that sparked his life-long interest in fossilization. Selinker goes on to describe in captivating detail the evolution, from early childhood to present, of his thoughts on the "fossilization puzzle" (p. 201) Finally, he introduces the "attention to other form" hypothesis (p. 208) which suggests that turning the L2 learner's attention away from core grammatical forms and onto non-core peripheral forms can lead to the automatization of core forms, thereby forestalling and possibly avoiding the potential for fossilization.

As Selinker so aptly observes, the "fossilization puzzle" continues to intrigue, challenge, and confound second language scholars and practitioners alike. Over the years, it has attracted researchers from a myriad of theoretical orientations and backgrounds and inspired literally hundreds of studies. In a book that is both open to and respectful of differences, Han and Odlin have assembled a collection of some of the most recent studies by esteemed scholars. As such, *Studies of Fossilization in Second Language Acquisition* has much to offer its intended readership of SLA researchers, students, and practitioners. However, as it presumes a rather sophisticated understanding of English grammar (and its accompanying metalanguage) and a fairly solid grounding in the theoretical underpinnings of fossilization research, this volume may be beyond the reach of some readers. To this end, a glossary of key terms, core concepts, and hypotheses would be helpful. And finally, since the material covered in this book is of such vital importance to second language practitioners – especially those who may have an interest in

fossilization and SLA but lack the time or opportunity to pursue it, whose knowledge has grown dated, or who were never formally schooled in SLA – it is hoped that the editors can be persuaded to collaborate on a companion volume as timely and intelligent as *Studies of Fossilization in Second Language Acquisition*, but with second language teachers, program directors, and others who hold a “front-row seat” to second language instruction in mind.

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