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**Challenging Fossilization: The Role of Motivation
in Second Language Acquisition**

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Abstract

After Selinker (1984) predicted that 95% of second language learners would never attain native-like command of the target language, fossilization became a major area of interest. Although the potential causes remain controversial, several scholars have pointed at the absence of motivation as a possibility. This research paper intends to demonstrate whether high levels of motivation can ultimately alter the learning outcome, i.e. be instrumental in overcoming fossilization. An overview of the hypothesis is provided before approaching the issue from the perspective of bilingualism, and the expectations built around second language students. Lastly, a series of case studies in which participants were reported to have attained outstanding proficiency were analysed. The findings indicate that there is an evident correlation between strong levels of motivation and linguistic achievement, but the attempt to make simple comparisons of L1 and L2 speakers in terms of their language attainment might be problematic.

Key words: fossilization, bilingualism, motivation, SLA, native speaker

1. Introduction

Interlanguage fossilization has been an object of research since the 1970s. Selinker (1984) claimed that the vast majority of second language (L2) learners are condemned to fall short of the end of the interlanguage (IL) continuum, i.e. they do not ultimately attain native-like competences in the target language (TL). They would most likely “fossilize” a set of “linguistic items, rules and subsystems” regardless of their age or “the amount of explanation and instruction they received” (Selinker: 36). It can be positive or negative, in other words both target-like and non-target-like forms can fossilize, and it is evidenced in the learner’s performance when he is focusing on form instead of meaning. Selinker argues that individuals “backslide” when they are anxious, excited or even extremely relaxed, making errors that were once believed to be corrected (p. 36). He set the success rate among L2 students at 5%, leading scholars to turn their attention towards the unsuccessful 95%.

In its formulation, Selinker assumes a clear distinction between first and second language acquisition. As Ellis (1985) notes, fossilization has been highly influenced by other first language (L1) acquisition theories, particularly Chomsky’s and Lenneberg’s. Selinker adopts Lenneberg’s claim of the existence of a “latent language structure” which contains the Universal Grammar (UG) and is both innate and constrained by maturity. According to the former, there must be a second language (L2) device which would be held responsible for second language acquisition (SLA). This mechanism would only be used when attempting to produce output in the L2 and it differs from Lenneberg’s in a number of ways: it has no genetic timetable, it is no counterpart to UG, it may never be activated, and it can overlap with other “intellectual structures” (Selinker: 33). In fact, according to Selinker, any learner who attempts to be successful would have to reactivate Lenneberg’s “latent structure” and “transform the universal grammar into the structure of

the grammar of the target language” (Ellis: 49). Hence, he concluded that only a small percentage would ultimately achieve their goal.

Selinker also pointed out five central processes to SLA that could eventually trigger fossilization. “Language transfer” appears to be the cause of errors influenced by the learner’s first language. As Ellis puts it, “where the first and second language share a meaning but express it in different ways, an error is likely to arise in the L2 because the learner will transfer the realization device from his first language into the second” (p. 22). “Transfer of training” occurs when mistakes stem from the learner’s instruction. In order to illustrate this Selinker addressed the struggle in distinguishing English pronouns ‘he’ and ‘she’ for Serbo-Croatian speakers, despite this same distinction existing in their own language (p. 39). The source of said problem could be found in their textbooks or teachers prioritizing ‘he’ over ‘she’ during class activities. Other processes are “strategies of second language learning”, when they result from “an identifiable approach by the learner to the material to be learned”; “strategies of second language communication”, when there is an “identifiable approach by the learner to communication with native speakers of the TL”; and “overgeneralization of TL rules and semantic features” (Selinker: 37).

However, and despite remaining as a relevant topic within the field of second language acquisition, fossilization appears to be assumed rather than attested. The figures provided by Selinker have often been quoted without any solid evidence, calling the grounds of the hypothesis into question. Moreover, research has not only shown that other variables can alter the learner’s final outcome but also that the assumption that learners can attain native-like competences is questionable, thus casting a doubt on Selinker’s claim about the 5% of completely successful learners. It has been reported that maturational constraints (Krashen, Long and Scarcella, 1979; Johnson and Newport, 1989; Singleton, 1989; DeKeyser, 2000), decrease of cerebral plasticity (Long, 1990;

Pulvermüller and Schumann, 1994) or motivation (Gardner and Lambert, 1972; Clement, Dörnyei and Noels, 1994; Gardner, 2000) play a key role in SLA. In fact, the latter has become of particular interest in the last decades, for highly motivated individuals have proved to achieve better results. Learning a new language requires commitment, which may be harder to maintain when the person is uninterested. As Gardner (2001) points out, “the motivated individual will express a strong desire to learn the language, and will strive to achieve success” (p. 6). However, students tend to be regarded as potential native speakers when they actually may not be. The notion of “nativeness” suffers from lack of consensus, with several scholars (Bley-Vroman, 1990; Sorace, 2003) highlighting the need to stop drawing comparisons between native and non-native speakers’ performances. Since Selinker’s hypothesis rests on the possibility of such a comparison, the question of what we mean by “nativeness” becomes critical.

The aim of this paper is to approach fossilization from two points of view: the native speaker bias and the influence of motivation in the L2 learning process. Firstly, I will make a brief review of the literature related to the hypothesis with a special focus on its major controversies. In the following section, I will consider the notion of bilingualism with a view to understanding what second language learners can be expected to achieve. Lastly, I will present case studies of highly motivated students in order to see if motivation could potentially be an important factor in what has been referred to as overcoming fossilization. More specifically, I will attempt to answer the following research questions:

1. Assuming that fossilization is an existing struggle for 95% of the learners, is it inevitable?
2. Otherwise, can motivation be instrumental in overcoming fossilization?

2. Fossilization: an overview

The fossilization hypothesis has undergone a series of changes since its first formulation in 1972. After predicting that only 5% of learners of all ages would ultimately succeed, Selinker then narrowed the scope to adults exclusively. He stated that “no adult can hope to ever speak a second language in such a way that s/he is indistinguishable from native speakers of that language” (Selinker 1996, cited in Long 2003: 510). Furthermore, Selinker and Lamendella (1978) postulated that such phenomenon was likely to affect “all levels of linguistic structure and in all discourse domains” regardless of the individual’s “positive ability, opportunity or motivation to learn or acculturate into target society” (cited in Long: 488-489). This was later ratified by Selinker (1989), who also viewed fossilization as context-dependent. Hence, learners would experience persisting “fluctuation in interlanguage performance”, i.e. ‘backsliding’ in certain “domains” despite constant interaction with native speakers (Long: 489).

Although revisited, fossilization still sparks great controversy among linguists. Selinker’s inconsistency and vagueness has allowed the hypothesis to become a “catch-all term” (Birdsong 2003, 2006, cited in Han 2013: 136): a resource available for researchers to describe a product, a process and a cognitive mechanism indistinctively. As Han (2004) puts it:

Fossilization – in the eyes of many – is a product as well as a process; it affects the entire IL system as well as its sub-systems; it is literally permanent as well as relatively permanent; it is persistent and resistant; for some researchers it happens to every learner and for others to only some learners. (p. 218)

Thus, in the following subsections, I am going to present some of the major issues encountered when approaching the literature.

2.1 Central issues

Despite Selinker's claims of existence of numerous studies supporting his ideas, very few of them do, in fact, meet his own requirements. He established a somewhat arbitrary 2 to 5-year time period of error persistence for it to be accounted as fossilization. Several scholars like Han (2004) have argued that this time frame is rather unfounded, for, even though the span varies from individual to individual, it should be, at least, based on "an average learner under optimal learning conditions" (p. 230). Nevertheless, assuming its veracity, only three studies follow Selinker's criterion and none of them lasted longer than 2 years. Others, however, take on an even more critical view on the matter. For instance, Jung (2002) stated that in order to demonstrate that a structure is indeed completely frozen, and thus fossilized, one would have to analyse "the learner's performance over a sufficient length of time, ideally from the moment of observation of a fossilized item until the learner's death" (cited in Han: 224).

Conducting studies on fossilization can also be challenging due to its methodological difficulties. Perhaps one of its main problems is the unit of analysis. Long argues that it is not clear whether the researcher is meant to study the entire IL system, or, for example, words, meanings and collocations instead (p. 491). As he points out, if learners of a particular L1 have attained certain structures and have grown to use them more accurately over time, yet they tend to avoid producing them, would these items be fossilized, even if they are still under development? (p. 492). The choice of subjects for the experiments has also been controversial. Selinker and Lamandella (1978) stressed that "positive ability, opportunity or motivation to learn or acculturate into target society" were indispensable requirements for any individual partaking in studies of this nature (cited in Long: 489). Hence, Long observed that several researchers may have also selected them inappropriately. According to Long, results cannot be conclusive when

based on groups of individuals who did not show enough interest towards the L2 or who lived in linguistic ghettos during their presumed stage of language immersion. Moreover, in order to identify structures that may be candidates to fossilize, the only errors taken into account should be those prevailing among groups of proficient learners (pp. 494-495). The general point raised in Long's objection is that the selection of subjects may in fact never be satisfactory.

Fossilization does not offer the possibility to make *a priori* predictions and many of them are not applicable to all learners due to its idiosyncrasy. This could be conflicting for the universality test. As previously mentioned, the IL subsystems affected by fossilization may vary from one individual to another. Therefore, the majority of studies rely on the ability to speculate about why something may have occurred, pointing at different factors alongside fossilization as potential causes. This seems incongruent for Long, who challenges the existence of Selinker's language mechanism altogether. He claims that, were there such system, it should suffice to justify what might have triggered fossilization, i.e. it would not need to work in tandem with other causes (p. 513). In fact, he challenges the veracity behind a mechanism that appears to "simultaneously apply and not apply to different structures, "freezing" material ones while allowing ungrammatical ones to continue to develop or (...) simultaneously apply and not apply to the same structure in different domains" (p. 492).

When understood as a product, fossilization is often seen as an age-related gradual loss of linguistic ability. Long posits that, theoretically, these two forces should not equate one another. Whereas fossilization refers to an individual phenomenon appearing under certain circumstances, e.g. lack of opportunities or motivation, maturational constraints describe a global decrease of cognitive capabilities (p. 519). However, the former extrapolates to elderly learners only and it does not seem able to speculate anything

beyond what could be already explained by the latter. Therefore, Long predicts that unless it appears to affect children and adults alike, fossilization as a concept will most likely disappear due to its redundancy (p. 520).

Insensitivity to negative feedback has also been regarded as a potential cause for fossilization. This appears incoherent, however. According to Long, if both correct and negative forms can be fossilized, they must be the outcome of the same mental processes. Moreover, it is rather unlikely that an individual is insensitive to negative input exclusively as opposed to input in general. He maintains that a more accurate assessment would take into consideration certain aspects of the target language in the input, such as saliency or frequency (pp. 516-517). This view has also been adopted by Han (2009), who developed the Selective Fossilization Hypothesis.

This updated version of Selinker's postulate aims to make predictions based on two forces: input and the speaker's L1. Input is described as robust or non-robust depending on its frequency and variability. If a form appears several times in the input (i.e. [+frequent]) and it only encodes one meaning (i.e. [-variable]), it will be robust. Non-robust is seen as [-frequent] and [+variable]. L1 forms are labelled as marked if [-frequent] and [+variable] and unmarked when [+frequent] and [-variable]. Fossilization is therefore seen as "a function of the interaction of an unmarked usage in the L1 and a piece of non-robust input providing weak evidence for some TL usage" (Han 2013: 145). However, this hypothesis is yet to be empirically tested.

Thus, fossilization appears to be hard to attest, if not completely unattested. The studies conducted to date cannot be accounted as rigorous according to Selinker's own criteria, which is also questionable based on the arbitrary time frame alone. There is also an existent inability to make predictions, a key feature of any hypothesis, and the

suggested “latent language structure” is arguably equally unfounded. Even the attempts, such as Han’s, to overcome some of its major deficiencies lack enough empirical support.

2.2 Fossilization or stabilization?

Fossilization appears to be a synonym for stabilization to some researchers. As reported by Richards (2008), several students experience a learning plateau once they attempt to go beyond lower-intermediate levels of proficiency. In other words, they “feel stuck” because the progress that they make is not as remarkable as it used to be when they were beginners. In fact, Fan Yi’s (2007) study of Chinese English majors showed that the students’ lexicon grew around 1500 words per year until they reached their last two academic years and the number decreased to 250 words (cited in Richards: 1).

This is also acknowledged by Han and Selinker (2001) who defined it as “a natural phase in all learning” (cited in Han 2004: 225). Nonetheless, they presented two further cases of stabilization: interlanguage restructuring and long-term cessation of interlanguage development. According to VanPatten (2003), restructuring involves the process of accommodation that learners have to undergo when integrating new structures. He maintains that these data “have to fit in”, causing changes in the IL system, although not all learners are able to retain them (cited in Richards: 7). Han and Selinker in particular argue that this can trigger “a surface appearance of stabilization of certain features”, illustrated by the U-shaped learning curve, where individuals experience a temporary downfall before progressing again (cited in Han: 225).

However, long-term cessation could possibly prompt fossilization, according to the scholars. If this were the case, learners would have to, at least, display one of these four features: non-variant appearance, where stabilized structures remain unmodified over time; backsliding, implying the re-emergence of errors that were assumed to be

eradicated; stabilized inter-contextual variation, when the learner produces target-like forms in certain contexts; and stabilized intra-contextual variation, when both target-like and non-target-like forms are produced in the same context (cited in Han: 225). Long (2003), on the other hand, claims that if stabilization is indeed a prelude to fossilization and yet what distinguishes one from the other is permanence, persistent fluctuation may be problematic. The definition of stabilization implies that there is lack of fluctuation, i.e. they are mutually exclusive. As he puts it: “fluctuation is not part of stabilization, yet stabilization is the precursor to fossilization, which can supposedly include fluctuation” (p. 489). Nevertheless, Han (2004) argues that the phenomena derive from different causes and that IL is, in fact, dynamic, which would allow some of these fluctuations to stabilize (p. 226).

Hence, stabilization creates another problem for the hypothesis, which can now be regarded as an oversimplification. If IL is indeed “dynamic”, it might always remain under development. Thus, a period of 2 to 5 years for a learner to be accounted as fossilized is probably insufficient. A more realistic approach would be to consider the notion of learning plateaus, instead of suggesting that there is a “final state”. This would imply that students experience a slower progression after reaching certain degrees of proficiency. Additionally, stabilization has been widely attested and it does not raise any problem concerning arbitrary time spans.

3. Bilingualism and the myth of the native speaker

According to Selinker, a successful learner is one who achieves native-like competences. However, the concept of “nativeness” is rather hard to define and often remains as a utopian goal. According to Chomsky (1965) a native speaker is able to give valid judgements as well as identify ungrammatical expressions in his language. In his own words:

linguistic theory is concerned with an ideal speaker-listener in a completely homogeneous speech community, who knows its language perfectly and is unaffected by such grammatically irrelevant conditions as memory limitations, distractions, shifts of attention and interest, and errors (random or characteristic) in applying his knowledge of the language in actual performance. (p. 3).

This “ideal speaker” who Chomsky places in an almost authoritarian position is based on the premise that there is indeed a “homogenous speech community”. Nonetheless, as Saniei (2011) points out, languages are, in fact, subject to regional, occupational, generational and even social class differences (p. 74). Hence, even though Chomsky acknowledges that grammars might differ from person to person, the existence of an “optimal grammar” seems idealistic.

Moreover, native speakers do not always “know their language perfectly” either. For instance, Bloomfield (1927) famously wrote about the case of a young Menonimi named White Thunder, whom he described as follows: “a man around forty, speaks less English than Menonimi, and that is a strong indictment, for his Menomini is atrocious. His vocabulary is small; his inflections are often barbarous; he constructs sentences of a few threadbare models. He may be said to speak no language tolerably” (cited in Hymes 1971: 273). L2 speakers, on the other hand, can also be more competent than natives in certain areas. Linge (2011), a Swedish teacher of Chinese as a second language, expressed how Chinese speakers seemed embarrassed when he used words that they were not familiar with. As he points out, natives themselves expect to know everything about their own language, even though such level of expertise is unattainable for anybody. He suggests that factors like the individual’s educational background, personal interests or profession play an important role in this context. In other words, someone who abandoned his studies at the age of 17 will most likely be unable to express himself the same way as someone who holds a PhD. Therefore, since speakers display different levels of mastery

of their mother tongue, “knowing a language perfectly” cannot be the only criterion to define whether someone is a first or a second language speaker.

Whether native-like command is acquirable is also controversial. Davies (1996) claims that only the first language learnt in childhood can be labelled as native. This is what he refers to as ‘bio-developmental definition’ (cited in Cook 1999: 185-186). Doerr (2009) argues that there is a strong correlation between being a citizen of a nation and being a native speaker of its language (cited in Creese, Blackledge and Takhi 2014: 938). Some other traits that other scholars have set as indicators of native speakerness are “having a range of language skills”, “the ability to communicate within social settings” (Stern 1983, cited in Shakouri and Shakouri 2014: 221), “identification with a language community” or “knowledge of differences between their own speech and that of the “standard” form of the language” (Davies 1996, cited in Cook: 186). However, non-natives meet some of these characteristics as well. Many L2 students feel encouraged to learn another language due to their identification with that speech community and, as Cook notes, many of them are aware of regional differences. Nevertheless, if seen as described by Davies, “nativeness” would be simply unattainable for any L2 learner. In fact, it would appear incongruent to rate their success solely based on how their performance differs from that of a “native speaker” if it is a goal that nobody can aspire to reach.

Nonetheless, natives tend to be pictured as monolinguals, for, as research has shown, there is no such thing as the “perfect bilingual”. Grosjean (1982) notes that bilinguals “are rarely fluent in their languages; some speak one language better than another, others use one of their languages in specific situations, and others can still only read and write one of the languages they speak” (cited in Davies 1991: 77). The author Joseph Conrad, for instance, is frequently cited as an example of someone who achieved

perfect mastery of an L2 but, despite his impeccable English writing skills, his oral speech was not as convincing. Virginia Woolf once described him as a “foreigner, talking only broken English” (Page 1986, cited in Cook: 185). Nevertheless, those bilinguals who do speak both languages fluently are also reported to have poorer lexicon than their monolingual counterparts, scoring lower on verbal fluency tasks, often encountering “more tip of the tongue experiences” or facing more interferences in lexical decision (Bialystok 2009: 4). Other linguists like Jespersen (1922) take on a more critical view, stating that bilinguals are unable to master any of the two languages perfectly (cited in Davies: 78). However, research points out that bilingual speakers tend to feel more competent in one of the two languages when performing certain tasks. Therefore, it appears that, once again, bilingual expertise may be context dependent. This might indicate that fossilization could be triggered by the limiting factors of said context, as opposed to the inability of using an internal language mechanism. In this view, a learner could continue to develop his abilities if the context was changed, which would also question the notion of fossilization altogether.

Hence, as the image of the successful L2 learner remains inaccessible, fossilization could result from the inability to assess second language students fairly. The traditional monolingual bias will always underrate them, although even L1 speakers themselves cannot aspire to mirror the idealised figure of the native speaker. The idea that L2 learners belong to an “imperfect” speech community has also been proved to be untenable, since there is no “perfect” homogenous community of L1 speakers either. Even those who presumably possess full command of the language display different degrees of mastery according to their education or interests, for example. Hence, Selinker’s success rate of 5% among SLA students is rather questionable. Perhaps those who are arguably

“fossilized” are highly competent in certain areas instead, whilst those described as exceptional learners might, in fact, not even respond to the scholar’s own definition.

4. Case studies of high achieving language learners

In the following section I am going to present three different studies in which the researchers encountered cases of adults who acquired “native-like” mastery in the target language. In Selinker (1989), post-puberty learners are described as highly sensitive to fossilization despite their “positive ability, opportunity or motivation” (cited in Long 2003: 489), unless they belong to the exceptional 5%. My aim is therefore to provide an overview of these subjects and consider whether their success was due to the reactivation of an internal mechanism alone or the influence of other factors.

Ioup, Boustagui, El Tigi and Moselle (1994) studied the cases of Julie and Laura, two particularly competent speakers of Egyptian Arabic. Despite both having English as their L1, their learning process was remarkably different. Whereas Julie’s was described as “naturalistic” (p. 77), since she had never received formal instruction, Laura had studied Arabic at university and even obtained a PhD prior to her arrival to Egypt. Hence, when Julie moved to Cairo at the age of 21 along with her Egyptian husband, she could not utter a word in the language. She “relied on context and gesture to interpret utterances and express meaning” (p. 77), until she started working as an ESL teacher and she began interacting with monolingual speakers in the workplace. Her length of residence (LOR) by the time the experiment took place was 26 years, although she was reported to pass for a native speaker after 2 and a half years in the country. Like Julie, Laura was also married to an Egyptian citizen, although she was a teacher of Standard Arabic instead. Her LOR was 10 years.

Both speakers were assessed in the three following areas: speech production, their ability to recognise accents and grammatical competence. In order to evaluate their oral

output, they were asked to produce spontaneous speech samples, in which they explained their favourite recipe. These, along with other recordings from both native and non-native speakers of the Cairene dialect, were later rated by a jury of 13 teachers of Arabic as a foreign language. A majority of 8 judges labelled Julie and Laura as native speakers. The ones who did not classify Julie as such, expressed that there were occasional errors of pronunciation or “instances of non-native intonation” which refrained them from doing so (p. 80). Laura, on the other hand, was said to have a “general accent” (p. 80). During the dialect differentiation task, the participants were first expected to discriminate among several different accents with a special focus on regional Egyptian dialects on the second part of the activity. As Ioup et al. pointed out, this assessment was of interest because it requires precisely nativelike skills, since even highly proficient L2 users seem to perform with less accuracy than “native speakers as young as age 10” (p. 80). Both Julie and Laura achieved perfect results in the first part, whilst Julie’s performance appeared closer to that of a native than Laura’s in the second one. Their grammatical competence was then tested throughout three assessments: a translation task, a grammatical judgment task and anaphora interpretation. Their scores on the first task were described as “flawless” (p. 82). In the grammatical judgment test, despite performing within native controls, they diverged in sentences which shared an agreement among natives of less than 80%. Anaphora interpretation caused more problems, however. Although Laura followed native speaker norms, Julie’s wrong responses seemed to “consistently distinguish” her from L1 speakers (p. 91).

Moyer (1999) also described the case of an “exceptional learner” of German. She conducted a study on ultimate attainment in L2 phonology of 24 graduate students in German at the University of Texas. Participants were asked to talk freely for several minutes as well as read a series of sentences and words that contained phones which

appear to be difficult for English speakers, i.e. front rounded vowels /ø, y/, glottal stop /G/, fricatives /ç, x/ and allophonic variation of /r/. These samples were later ranked by four native speakers of German. Throughout the study, Moyer noticed that one of the participants displayed extraordinary mastery of the target language, being systematically rated as a native in every task. The individual had never been exposed to German, or any other language, prior to the age of 22. Moyer also highlighted that, by the time she collected the data, he had only received five years of formal instruction. The participant expressed that he first started attending German lessons out of personal interest, for he was fascinated “with the language and with Germans” (p. 98). Such interest was strong enough to lead him to listen “to exchange student friends from Germany in order to “absorb the sounds” before going abroad” (p. 98). Another personal goal of his was “to acculturate and to sound German” (p. 98), something that Moyer found somewhat rare, as the majority of the subjects in her study did not have any desire to feel or be regarded as native speakers. She added that “twelve out of 24 specifically wrote that being understood by natives was most important but that perfect pronunciation was neither realistic nor necessary for overall fluency” (p. 88).

Similarly, Nikolov (2000) reported the case of two outstandingly successful learners of Hungarian and English. Both participants scored particularly high in tasks which, like Moyer’s, aimed to assess their ultimate phonology attainment and oral competence. These consisted of interviews in which the subjects had to present their SLA journey, as well as describe either an embarrassing or happy memory and read an authentic passage in the language of study. One of the two exceptional participants was a bilingual speaker of German and English who settled in Hungary at the age of 21. She had been living in the country for almost 50 years, where she worked as a part-time guide. Like Julie, she had never received formal instruction either. She was reported to have

learnt the language through reading. At first, she would borrow “penny books” from the library and, eventually, she read “everything else available” (p. 117). A 23-year-old Hungarian teacher of English also obtained comparable results. He seemed to have gained proficiency while listening to BBC radio programmes outside school. At first, he would guess “meaning from the context and soon he sounded like any BBC announcer” (p. 117), although he later studied a semester abroad.

Interestingly, these speakers seem to display strong levels of integrative and intrinsic motivation. All of them were described as highly committed and very few of them had received language instruction at all. Integrative oriented individuals distinguish themselves from other learners due to their genuine interest towards the L2 speech community. This might involve “complete identification” with its speakers “and possibly even withdrawal from one’s original group” (Gardner 2001: 5). Moyer’s speaker of German is a clear example of someone who embodies these traits. The driving force of his success was his “fascination” for the said speech community, which led him to deliberately seek interaction with Germans in order to “absorb” the language. The other learners were also equally interested in being acculturated by the target language society. In line with this, Noels (2001) argued that intrinsically motivated students show “inherent pleasure and interest in the activity” (p. 45). She distinguishes, at least, three subtypes:

1. Intrinsic-Knowledge: it describes the satisfaction that stems from learning about something that the student has a genuine interest for.
2. Intrinsic-Accomplishment: it stands for the feelings experienced by a learner who has overcome a seemingly hard activity.
3. Intrinsic-Stimulation: defined as “the simple enjoyment of the aesthetics of the experience” (Noels: 45). She suggests the example of an individual who decides to learn a new language due to its pleasant sonority.

These speakers stood out from other subjects of study due to their avid interest in “sounding native”. All of them were reported to have a strong desire to be regarded as other members of the community, and therefore paid close attention to mimicry. For instance, the Hungarian learner of English acquired his phonology through imitating BBC broadcasters. This was a goal that they set themselves, for the vast majority of L2 learners do not view phonology as a priority and may not even entertain the possibility of being mistaken for native speakers. It is therefore intrinsic and, as Noels described, they seemed to experience satisfaction when reaching such achievements, which encouraged them to make further progress. In fact, it might be these “accomplishments” that sets them apart from other unsuccessful L2 learners.

Nevertheless, Ioup et al. suggested the existence of a language learning “talent”. The linguists argued that this could be due to an “unusual brain organization where a greater proportion of cortex is devoted to language” and which would allow more cognitive flexibility when processing and organizing L2 input (p. 92). This “inherited trait” is associated with left-handedness, twinning or allergies, all of which Julie claimed to be present in her family (p. 92). Moreover, such gifted learners tend to acquire their L1 faster. This was also her case, as her mother affirmed that she could produce full sentences at the age of 18 months. Other associated characteristics include high associative memory and ability to master new codes or “an ear for phonetic cues” (p. 93). This would, perhaps, be in line with Selinker’s views, which also argued that biological characteristics were a crucial factor in SLA. However, only Julie would fit in that description, as opposed to the other learners who appeared to attain comparable levels of success.

Once again, it seems like the reactivation of a latent language structure, given its existence, is not the only way through which L2 learners could overcome fossilization. Although, as observed in Julie, a specific brain organization might be of use, the other

presented case studies also obtained similar achievements, which would challenge Selinker's predictions. These speakers were not reported to possess higher language aptitudes, although they shared great levels of motivation. This could indicate that, indeed, motivation plays a key role in language learning settings and could potentially lead learners to achieve the desired success.

5. Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to examine the predictions made by the fossilization hypothesis and whether these could be altered by affective factors, and motivation in particular. As previously observed, fossilization appears to be an assumption based around previous accounts on first language acquisition rather than a founded theory. For instance, Selinker stated that only 5% of learners would eventually acquire high levels of proficiency. This figure has been repeatedly quoted, although he never provided solid evidence to support it and, in fact, it has never been demonstrated. The linguistic proficiency that the scholar suggests, however, would only be obtainable through the reactivation of a "latent language structure", which he borrowed from Chomsky and has no empirical support either. Additionally, related experiments have also caused great controversy, since they do not seem to follow any rigorous methodology or choose their participants accordingly.

Even though Chomsky's views on the native speaker also prevailed in Selinker's theory, research has shown that the existence of an individual who has full knowledge of a language is unattainable for both L1 and L2 speakers. In fact, members of the same speech community may show different degrees of mastery depending on their profession or their education, for example. Therefore, it is unrealistic to base a hypothesis around the premise that there are individuals who display such command. Nevertheless, assuming that the goal is to perform as similarly as possible to an L1 speaker, in this study

I have presented a number of subjects who achieved these accomplishments. These individuals were often referred to as “exceptional”, for they do, indeed, constitute a minority. However, only in one occasion biological factors were attributed to the success of the learner but this “language talent” was due to an unusual brain disposition rather than a mechanism devoted to SLA exclusively. Surprisingly, motivation was held responsible for the learning outcome of the other four individuals.

Although this study strengthens the idea that motivation is a reliable predictor in overcoming fossilization, research seems to suggest that there is no such thing as “fossilized learners”. Interlanguage is in constant development, which makes it difficult to determine whether there is ever an end state. Moreover, taking into account the notion of bilingualism, the assessment applied to language students might not be particularly accurate. They may be highly competent in certain areas whilst presenting deficiencies in some others, but these problems are also present among L1 speakers. When drawing direct comparisons between an idealised L1 figure and an L2 user, the latter will most likely appear as “imperfect” or “incomplete”. However, the possibility of improvement over time means that “fossilization” is not in fact inevitable.

Therefore, this study raises the question of whether the notion that first and second language acquisition can or should have a common goal is plausible. If not, the concept of fossilization, which assumes one can make a direct and simple comparison of L1 and L2 speakers, is misleading. Also, it is questionable how a theory can be developed based on a key construct that cannot be demonstrated in a satisfactory way. Further research should explore the possibility of offering a different assessment, which does not focus only on what learners fail to achieve, but also what they are capable of achieving. This would perhaps shed more light on the issue of fossilization.

6. Bibliography

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