Written Corrective Feedback as a Means to Validate the Selective Fossilization Hypothesis: Issues to Consider

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Since Selinker (1972) coined the term *fossilization* to characterize the phenomenon in which second language (L2) learners cease to progress in the acquisition *process*, much effort (e.g., Bates & MacWhinney, 1981; Krashen, 1981, cited in Han & Odlin, 2006) has been made to research instances of such premature stabilization of deviant L2 *forms* both within and across learners. Nonetheless, as Birdsong (2003, cited in Han & Odlin, 2006) aptly points out, the term has been (mis)used by many simply as a "catch-all" term, i.e., a handy metaphor for describing *any* lack of progress in L2 learning, regardless of its nature. It is therefore not surprising that little has been achieved as far as the development of a comprehensive analytic model throughout almost forty years of fossilization research. Against this background, Han (2009) proposes the Selective Fossilization Hypothesis (SFH), seeking to account for the fossilizability of target L2 structures through establishing: (1) empirically operationalizable variables (i.e., first language (L1) markedness and L2 input robustness) and subvariables (i.e., frequency and variability); (2) a first-of-its-kind analytical model of fossilization, whose "boundary conditions" still require further investigation.

One worthwhile avenue for exploration is whether the SFH holds for L2 written corrective feedback (CF). Validating the explanatory and predictive power of the SFH by conducting thorough empirical analysis of data generated based on the L2 (modified) input provided to the learner is an important and necessary first step for the model itself to be able to function to its full capacity. In addition, empirical analysis of such data enables us to predict what linguistic features tend to fossilize more (or less) than others, and to quantify the relative effectiveness of the variables in the SFH. One methodological challenge, however, is the operationalization of the key SFH constructs, considering that it can be done in diverse ways. For example, the subvariable of L2 input frequency may be operationalized, among other specifications, as "the number of target structure(s) for the treatment," "the type(s) and tokens of corrective the feedback device(s) employed," or "duration of the study and length of the treatment period" (W.-M. Lew, personal communication, November 4, 2009). In order to avoid confounding results, researchers may want to choose one construct for their specific measurements, while controlling for others.

Written CF and other qualitative methods of documenting the exact input provided to the L2 learner, such as the Initiation-Response-Feedback (IRF) model in discourse analysis (Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975, 1992), are but examples of the wide range of possibilities and options available to validate and refine the SFH. Perhaps this is where the ultimate challenge lies: to stay open-minded to all viable options available – not only from within the field of SLA, but also from other subfields of applied linguistics, or even related disciplines such as cognitive psychology and cognitive science.

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