

## The Fossilization-Formula Interface

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The construct of fossilization has enjoyed considerable scrutiny over nearly four decades of second language acquisition (SLA) research. In contrast, the phenomena of formulaic expressions (FEs), which are multi-word language chunks processed as a whole, have historically attracted only marginal interest in the field of SLA especially given the long-standing influence of the generative-nativist paradigm and its focus on discrete morphosyntactic constituents. Recently, FEs have been reevaluated with regard to interlanguage use and potential for contributing to interlanguage development (N. Ellis, 2002; Van Lancker Sidtis, 2009; Wray, 2000). This resurgence in interest auspiciously coincides with Han's (2009) publication of *Interlanguage and fossilization: Towards an analytic model* with potentially fruitful repercussions. It is suggested here that cultivating an SLA perspective on FEs in tandem with Han's analytic model on fossilization may prove useful in two ways: (1) FEs may provide a useful testing ground for the scope and predictions about fossilizable structures made by the analytic model, and (2) the model might provide a clearer understanding of how various types of FEs are used by L2 learners and develop in the interlanguage.

Han (2009) proposes a compelling model that elucidates how fossilization of a particular language feature can result from interactions between L1 markedness and L2 input robustness, both defined by frequency and variability interactions. For example, linguistic features that are highly frequent and invariable may be unmarked in a learner's first language (L1). Equally, the target feature's counterpart in the L2 input may also be frequent and invariable and thus appears as robust learnable evidence to the learner. The interaction between L2 input robustness and L1 markedness is a proposed schematic by which one can predict the fossilizability of L2 linguistic features.

Specific language features have been deemed likely candidates for fossilization, namely those that interface syntax with pragmatics and discourse-level concepts. This is because these features often exhibit permutations of variability and frequency in the L1 and L2 and have abstract and subtle meanings. These facts are likely to impair one's ability to make strong form-meaning-use connections and thus predispose a feature to fossilization.

The construct of *formulaic expression* holds great relevance for our concerns of fossilization of syntax, and pragmatics. A formulaic expression, recently dubbed "formuleme" (Van Lancker Sidtis, 2009), is most often viewed as a multi-morphemic expression with canonical form that is processed as a holistic unit and identified as idiomatic within a speech community (Van Lancker Sidtis, 2009; Weinert, 1995; Wray, 2000). Formulaic expressions have been observed to perform numerous linguistic functions, including those that operate at the syntax-pragmatic and syntax-discourse interface. FEs can convey denotative meaning either as idioms (i.e., *kick the bucket* = die) or as highly frequent lexical collocations with fixed order (*salt and pepper*, not *\*pepper and salt*); structure information (i.e., *first of all, and another thing*); perform speech acts (i.e., *Get outta here* = I don't believe you, provide more evidence); serve as topic-opening, topic-maintaining, or topic-closing moves (i.e., *So what's up with you? What else? Well that's enough of that!*); be used in honorifics or social conventions of face (i.e., *Your*

*Highness, I am deeply honored*); or convey affective or phatic content (i.e., *That's what I'm talkin' about* = agreement with emphasis on showing alignment with one's interlocutor). In addition to fixed morphological form, there is often a requisite prosodic quality to the expression that signals to listeners how the expression is to be interpreted.

The notion of canonicity is critical because native speakers are aware of the potential morphosyntactic and lexical variations they may impose on a formuleme and still make its canonical form pragmatically accessible. In this way, the canonical formuleme and its variations can be used to color discourse with subtle affective or connotative qualities. An example of a formuleme and its potential variation might be *open a can of worms*, meaning to discover more problems than one had hoped for, and its variation *give rise to a delectable can of worminess*, meaning to create a large degree of intriguing or pleasing complexity (with a play on the grotesque notion of worms as appetizing). Clearly, the first case is the canonical form, whereas the second case is the author's own improvised variation. It is posited here that only an extremely competent speaker could vary a canonical form and make it be pragmatically accessible.

In many acts of discourse, FEs are used in conjunction with what is deemed *propositional language* to create idiomatic usage. Propositional language entails phrases that are cobbled together using morphosyntactic rules and individually selected lexical items. For example, to describe a young man kicking a basket of apples, there is no commonly used phrase to describe this. Words and assembly rules must be recruited to derive a sentence that describes the scene: *The young man kicked a basket of apples*. However, despite our word-and-rule capacity, it has been noted that native speakers possess vast inventories of formulaic expressions and use them in upwards of twenty-five percent of oral discourse (Van Lancker Sidtis, 2009). Such usage contributes greatly to the perceptions of idiomaticity amongst speakers. Thus, the construct of idiomaticity as an L1 fact in communicative competence and as an L2 learning goal must necessarily entail the notion of FEs in addition to lexis and morphosyntax.

In brief, FEs are a heterogeneous group of language features, serving numerous semantic, structural, discourse, and socio-pragmatic functions in discourse. As such, they are often problematic for L2 learners in that they do not lend themselves to easy conclusions about their form-meaning-function associations, especially when native speakers play with canonical forms. Furthermore, there is some evidence for pragmatic fossilization. For example, Romero Trillo (2002) cites L2 corpus data that identifies FEs as fossilizable language features: phrases such as *you know*, *I mean*, and *You see*. Given these observations, it seems logical that FEs be considered through the optic provided by Han's fossilization model.

Because FEs are variable in form, function, and frequency, and their meanings are not always evident in a target language, they may prove to be fossilizable structures as well. Fossilization in this domain might manifest itself as the complete omission of certain types of FEs from the interlanguage, avoidance in language use, or as an imperfect form-meaning-function mapping in a learner's production of a formuleme or its variation. While an important first step is to further identify and categorize FEs according to their role in communication as Nattinger and DeCarrico (1992), and Wray (2000) have done, we can extend our knowledge of how FEs are implicated in interlanguage development and used by L2 learners through the application of Han's rubric of L2 input robustness and L1 markedness. Conversely, FEs might contribute validating evidence for Han's analytic model at the levels of lexicon, pragmatics, and discourse.

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