

***Fossilization in Adult Second Language Acquisition***

ZhaoHong Han. Clevedon, England: Multilingual Matters. 2004. Pp. x + 201.

Most non-native speakers would agree that it is sometimes frustrating to communicate in another language. Many have embarrassing stories about how they have been misunderstood or have not been able to convey their intended messages at all. In the field of second language acquisition (SLA), there is little doubt that native-like mastery of a second language (L2) by adult non-native speakers is hard to attain (Bley-Vroman, 1989; Schachter, 1988). Failure in some aspects of the language is to be expected, and this is the reason why the nature of this failure has to be investigated thoroughly. *Fossilization in Adult Second Language Acquisition* takes a long step towards shedding light onto the nature of *failure*. This book offers a systematic analysis of fossilization, a phenomenon which occurs despite continuous exposure to the target language input, sufficient motivation to improve, and ample opportunity to practice.

In chapter 1, Han introduces the concept of *failure* in SLA and why it is important to study it systematically. Even though the concept of fossilization exists in the field of SLA, it is somehow buried under discussions of ultimate attainment. On the one hand, it is perceived as a general failure, which can be defined as the impossibility of attaining native-like proficiency due to various factors, the two most prominent being the Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH) and native language transfer. These two factors seem to precondition learners to permanent failure. On the other hand, not everybody fails to learn a second language completely, nor do they experience equal difficulty with the same structures. This leads to differential success or failure on the part of the learners. Han organizes her discussion around these two perspectives, which she labels *macroscopic* and *microscopic* respectively, in order to obtain a clearer picture of failure in L2 acquisition.

In chapter 2, Han briefly summarizes various definitions of fossilization and their evolution since the inception of the concept (Selinker, 1972). The first section of the chapter consists of a review of the various definitions of fossilization proposed by Selinker. The discussion illustrates the gradual abstraction of the concept: from fossilization as a cognitive phenomenon affecting the acquisition of a second language and a structure-related phenomenon manifested as *backsliding* (i.e., the reemergence of deviant forms that seemed to have been eradicated) to *permanent cessation of learning* and *fossilized competence*. Essentially, Selinker seems to suggest that fossilization is innate and inevitable and that it will most likely doom learners to permanent failure. As far as the other researchers are concerned, some have claimed that fossilization might affect the whole language system, while others argue that it only affects some subsystems. Similarly, some researchers contend that fossilization might affect every language learner, whereas others suggest that it might affect learners who are already predisposed to fossilization. For instance, late starters and learners whose native language is typologically different from the target language are the strongest candidates to be affected by the phenomenon of fossilization.

As the survey of various definitions illustrates, researchers have attempted to clarify the concept of fossilization over the years, and they have acknowledged the fact that fossilization is a central characteristic of SLA (e.g., Towell & Hawkins, 1994). Yet the same researchers have been unable to reach a consensus in their conceptualization of fossilization. Most of the

differences seem to focus on several issues at the heart of the conceptualization. The last section of chapter 2 is devoted to the discussion of the following questions: (1) whether fossilization is a global or a local phenomenon, and (2) whether fossilization is a product or a process. Expertly presenting both sides of the issue, Han, with the help of her definition of fossilization, and thus her conceptualization of the phenomenon, aspires to provide a definitive answer to the discussion. Han argues that fossilization occurs locally, rather than globally, and that it is a process observable in its manifestation as a product. Obviously, her claims provide researchers with the opportunity to design empirical studies to test the validity of this novel conceptualization.

Chapter 3 reviews the learners' behaviors that are labeled as manifestations of fossilization over the years. In the absence of a theoretical conceptualization, researchers have taken liberties with the term "fossilization" and have attributed a variety of behavioral reflexes to the term. Among them are backsliding, persistent non-target-like performance, typical error, cessation of learning, errors that are impervious to negative evidence, and errors made by advanced learners. These learners' behaviors have been linked to various factors, some of which seem to be supported empirically, and some of which are the products of sheer speculation. Han analyzes them all and creates a taxonomy of the factors leading to fossilization. The upper level of the taxonomy broadly categorizes the factors as external and internal to the learner. Internal factors are further categorized as cognitive, neuro-biological, or socio-affective. Some of the individual factors (e.g., absence of corrective feedback, lack of access to universal grammar, and automatization of faulty knowledge) are supported by evidence from empirical studies. The taxonomy seems to clarify the confusing conceptualization and application of the term. It also shows that fossilization is not a monolithic concept as postulated originally, but a complex construct that is internally determined but externally modulated.

Several major theoretical models of language acquisition (e.g., the Competition Model and the Universal Grammar (UG) approach) have identified maturational constraints and native language transfer as the two most important factors influencing success in SLA. These models explicitly predict failure for language learners if they start to acquire the language after puberty. In addition, the learners' native language might heavily influence their grammatical competence in the L2. Given the importance of these two factors, they are discussed systematically and in detail in chapters 4 and 5.

Chapter 4 is devoted to a discussion of age effects on language acquisition. This part of the book provides a thorough analysis of the notion of critical period by first providing a definition and then discussing its modular nature. Han's systematic analysis also uncovers new lines of inquiry into the Critical Period Hypothesis. She mainly suggests that research should be undertaken to isolate additional factors that may be confounded with age and to analyze their interaction. Similarly, chapter 5 provides another macroscopic analysis of the second millstone in SLA: native language interference. In the field of SLA, research on language transfer is abundant. The results are diverse but seem to support the idea that the native language (L1) marks the point of departure for subsequent language acquisition. Obviously, the issue at hand is multifaceted and complex in nature. L1 influence can explain the general lack of mastery of the L2 by adult learners. Nonetheless, the CPH and language transfer, alone or in combination,

cannot always account for the differential success among learners. The following chapter in the book is devoted to a discussion of other variables that appear to have an impact on acquisition.

As mentioned earlier, language acquisition is multi-faceted; many factors are at play in the acquisition process. In chapter 6, Han explores social, cognitive, environmental, and psychological factors. These factors form the basis of local fossilization as opposed to global fossilization. In the context of the book, local failure pertains to the idiosyncratic differences across learners that cannot be explained by the CPH or native language transfer alone. The discussion of different approaches to identifying fossilization in learners exemplifies different methodological approaches (e.g., longitudinal, typical error, or advanced learner approaches). The general conclusion that can be drawn from the review of these approaches is that not a single approach by itself is adequate to explain fossilization. The longitudinal approach, in combination with other approaches, might improve the efficacy of future investigation. Furthermore, the results from the studies seem to support the conclusion that fossilization is a multi-dimensional construct. There is abundant evidence that fossilization strikes individuals differentially. In sum, the CPH and native language already sentence learners to failure, but other factors can also cluster together resulting in varying degrees of failure for every language learner.

Chapter 7 investigates the effects of instruction from an unusual perspective. The role of instruction has been well acknowledged in SLA in that it accelerates learning and may be necessary for some learners who are experiencing difficulty with specific structures. On the other hand, instruction might work against learners, since the classroom setting can be restrictive. Furthermore, curricula are designed for a general body of students, regardless of such factors as a learner's readiness. A predetermined agenda might not serve the same purpose for all the individuals who go through different processes and who bring unique dispositions to the classroom setting. Han provides ample evidence from selected studies conducted on classroom input, pedagogic strategies, and opportunity for use of language within and outside of the classroom to illustrate how instruction might well impede acquisition and result in fossilization.

The last chapter is a synopsis of the book. It tells the readers how the definition of fossilization has evolved from its early conceptualization to its present form. Three facets of fossilization seem to emerge: "(1) general lack of success, (2) differential success and failure across learners, (3) differential success and failure within learners" (p. 166). This new perspective in conceptualizing fossilization supercedes earlier notions of the construct. However, subsequent research has shown that fossilization is not a monolithic concept. Every learner is affected by it in different ways. Obviously, a logical line of inquiry should take this into account. This chapter of the book will be most appreciated by graduate students and SLA researchers who want to contribute to the ongoing discussion on fossilization. Preceding chapters paint a picture of SLA from a different perspective: a perspective of failure as opposed to one of attainment. While the bulk of the discussion aims at unearthing different aspects of fossilization, it challenges conventional views on various beliefs (e.g., the role of instruction). The next step is to undertake empirical studies that would validate the claims put forth by the book. Both longitudinal and cross-sectional studies would contribute to the understanding of fossilization.

*Fossilization in Adult Second Language Acquisition* is an important resource for anybody interested in comprehending fossilization theoretically and investigating it experimentally. The

reader is rewarded with a systematic and thorough analysis of the research findings pertaining to fossilization. The meticulous synthesis of various concepts gives the reader leverage in understanding *failure* in the SLA conundrum.

**ÖZLEM PAZVANT**

*Teachers College, Columbia University*

## REFERENCES

- Bley-Vroman, R. (1989). What is the logical problem of foreign language learning? In S. Gass (Ed.), *Linguistic perspectives on second language acquisition*. (pp. 41-68). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Schachter, J. (1988). Second language acquisition and its relationship to universal grammar. *Applied Linguistics*, 9, 219-235.
- Selinker, L. (1972). Interlanguage. *IRAL*, 10, 209-231.
- Towell, R. & Hawkins, R. (1994). *Approaches to second language acquisition*. Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters.