

On the Causation of Lexical Fossilization and Its Countermeasures

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Abstract. This thesis made further analysis of lexical fossilization, explored the phenomenon of lexical fossilization respectively from the inflections of words, word formation, and word meaning, analyzed the causation of lexical fossilization from the input and output hypothesis, the affective filter, and the transfer of mother language, and also put forward the corresponding countermeasures.

1. Introduction

This study is undertaken to find the causation of lexical fossilization and explore appropriate measures to avoid it which hinders foreign language learners to acquire and use foreign language. In theoretical perspective, foreign language learners should tend to be closer to the target language with an increasing input of lexical knowledge of target language, while research illustrates that when foreign language learners acquire lexical knowledge to a certain degree, they are always in a state of wandering or a little slip, and even cannot reach the former level in overall. In other words, they cannot grasp the lexical knowledge like native speakers. Although some experts at home or abroad have studied the causation and countermeasures of lexical fossilization, there still exists insufficiency in the study of lexical fossilization, and the lack of specific analyses of the lexical fossilization. Therefore, study of the causation and countermeasures of lexical fossilization are still a challenging job and far from perfection.

2. Literature Review

Fossilization was firstly defined by Selinker (1996: 215) as follows: Fossilizable linguistic phenomenon is linguistic items, rules, and subsystems which speakers of a particular native language tend to keep in their interlanguage related to a particular target language, no matter what the age of the learner or amount of explanations and instructions he receive in the target language. Due to the advancement of the concept of fossilization by Selinker (1996: 215), fossilization has attracted much attention of many foreign language researchers and scholars abroad and at home. They are obsessed to discover the causes of fossilization. Therefore, there exist a variety of inexplicit and explicit explanations of fossilization, which will be respectively presented in the next sections.

2.1 The Definition of Fossilization.

Selinker (1968) firstly noted that the majority of second language learners failed to reach the same competence of native speakers, and found out that their final state of foreign language learning was not identical to the target language. Based on this phenomenon, the definition of fossilization was advanced by Selinker in 1972, which read that the long term persistence of plateaus of non-target-like structures in the interlanguage of non-native speaker had been called fossilization.

However, with the development of theories of new second language acquisition and accumulation of more empirical evidences, the amendment of this definition is inevitable. Selinker (1972) restricted the study of fossilization to syntactic perspective only as he defined the fossilization phenomenon as “the persistence of no-target-like structures”. Besides, the phrase “long term” provides an ambiguous standard for identifying fossilization in empirical studies. Because some non-target-like forms in the process of interlanguage development can be converted into target-like forms, and these forms cannot be divided into fossilization errors. For example, when there is sufficient exposure to target input, a lexical error may not exist in one’s interlanguage for a couple of years. Taking these

factors into consideration, Selinker (1996) redefined fossilization, which read that fossilizable linguistic phenomenon was linguistic items, rules, and subsystem which speakers of a particular native language tended to keep in their interlanguage related to a particular target language, no matter what the age of the learners they are or amount of explanation and instruction they received in the target language.

2.2 Studies Abroad.

From the diachronic respect, the investigation on the causation of fossilization has roughly gone through a relatively long time. Therefore, there are a large number of different theories which have been put forward to account for the causation of fossilization. Firstly, from psycholinguistic perspective, Selinker (1972) divided the causation of fossilization into five processes which are respectively organized by native language, transfer of training, strategies of communication, strategy of learning and overgeneralization of target language rules. In his view, second language learners are endowed with language acquisition device to acquire a second language rather than psychological structure. Besides, the psychological explanation proposed by Selinker, some experts explain the causes of fossilization from biological respect. In 1977, Lamendella proposed the critical period hypothesis which believes that the best time for second language learners to acquire second language is before the puberty, while it will cause the loss of neurological plasticity after that time. Due to the loss of neurological plasticity, the abilities of second language acquisition will decline. Apart from the psycholinguistic and biological aspect, fossilization has been expounded from social-psychological, language input perspective. Therefore, there are a variety of theoretical analyses of fossilization causes which have been presented.

2.3 Studies at Home.

At home, the researches on fossilization began from the end of 19th century, 30 years later than western countries. Actually speaking, researchers at home did not pay attention to the study of fossilization until the opening-up and reform policy was deepened. However, there still exist a lot of numerous and valuable investigations on the causes of fossilization. In 1997, Chen Yaping conducted a survey on the English performance of the English-major students and discovered that fossilization was a widespread phenomenon (Liu Jianhui, 2007: 20), and he pointed out that the learning process was actually controlled by psychological and cognitive rules which eventually lead to fossilization. In 1999, Selinker's five psycholinguistic processes were further analyzed by Dai and Niu (1999:10) who proposed that affective factors of learners, L1 transfer, teachers and teaching material should be taken into consideration when teaching and learning a foreign language. Altogether, these studies make contribution to second language teachers and learners.

3. The Causation of Lexical Fossilization

Without understanding the causation of lexical fossilization, the second language learners will be faced with great frustration or even termination in second language learning. In this part, a brief introduction of some theories concerning the causes of lexical fossilization is provided.

3.1 Insufficient Quantity and Inappropriate Quality of Input.

Krashen (1985) claimed that insufficient quantity of input is one of the most conspicuous causes of lexical fossilization. If the foreign language learners stop getting comprehensive input, their competence of acquiring second language may cease progress. Krashen (1985) classified the groups of people to whom insufficient input applies, and among whom he emphasized the foreign language students who do not live in the town where the language is spoken, and who have little access to native speakers in the target language (Zhou Wenling, 2004: 16). Most foreign language learners belong to this group. If the hypothesis of insufficient quantity of input formulated by Krashen (1985) is true, we can at least infer that most foreign language learners who stay at home and have little access to native speakers are lack of sufficient quantity of input in target language, and they are more prone to get fossilized in the process of foreign language learning.

Inappropriate quality of input means the input of wrong forms, rules and patterns of vocabulary. The foreign language learners incorrectly used the third-person singular, and wrongly mixed the tense and aspect categories. Besides, when foreign language learners are faced with homonymy, they tend

to be confused. For example, Chinese learners always incorrectly use a “yellow” book for a pornographic book, but it is an international certificate of vaccination or a government report in reality. Moreover, a limited range of lexical input is also one of inappropriate quality of input; for example, attendants in gas station use English every day but hear only a set of phrases such as “fill’er up”.

3.2 The Affective Filter.

Comprehensive input is not the whole process of full language acquisition. In order to acquire the entire language, a low affective filter may be essential. The affective filter is the obstacle that prevents input from becoming the intake, and prevents the full acquisition from taking place. Krashen (1982) suggested that if second language learners were exposed in less pressure environment, they were prone to acquire language quickly and easily. Children usually have a lower filter than adults, so they tend to have superiority in ultimate attainment. Besides, lack of need is the other thing for the affective filter in lexical level. Concerning foreign language learners who have learnt English for at least 10 years, they may acquire a lot of English words, but, due to lack of need, acquisition can also be stopped because the acquirer simply does not “need” any more competence. Because the foreign language learners only choose to input the familiar and necessary knowledge, while choose to filter the strange and unnecessary knowledge which the foreign language learners learned in order to finish the task or get some certificate.

3.3 Language Transfer in Lexical Level.

Kellerman (1978) suggested that the term “transfer” be restricted to “those processes that lead to the incorporation of elements from one language into another”. In other words, the language transfer is the influence of one language on the learning of another. To some extent, language transfer determines the quantity and quality of success in foreign language learning. Therefore, the further research on language transfer is indispensable.

Positive transfer refers to the fact that the foreign language learners take advantage of the similarities between native language and target language. In other words, native language has positive influence on the foreign language learning and makes foreign language learning easier. For example, “hong mei gui” in Chinese is translated into “red rose” in English. The commonness between native language and target language may facilitate language learning and reduce fossilization. However, negative transfer refers to the fact that native or any previously acquired language has negative influence on the new foreign language learning. The foreign language learners are prone to produce some English forms on the basis of their Chinese. If these erroneous forms are not corrected in time, they will be fossilized. For example “mian hong er chi” in Chinese can only be translated into “put on a green face” rather than “put on a red face”. Therefore, foreign language learners should make full use of positive transfer and avoid negative transfer.

4. Overcoming or Reducing Lexical Fossilization

On the basis of classification of categories of fossilization, and analysis of causes of lexical fossilization in detail, a conclusion can be drawn that a majority of foreign language learners belong to the group of temporary fossilization. And the major causes of fossilization are insufficient quantity of input, inappropriate quality of input, the affective filter and language transfer. Therefore, the urgent measures should be taken to reduce temporary fossilization transferring to permanent fossilization.

4.1 To Provide Sufficient and Correct Second Language Input in Lexical Level.

Input is one of the significant parts of language learning; on the other hand, it can also be seen as the beginning point of the fossilization. Thus, the quantity of second language input plays a decisive role in reducing lexical fossilization. To do so, a comprehensive input in lexicon is necessary, and the learner’s ability of foreign language acquisition, their learning characteristic, and their social ability should be taken into account. The lexical input should be just a little higher than their current stage. Moreover, the lexical input in classroom is far from being sufficient. Thus, foreign language learners should strengthen their daily accumulation and broaden their horizon. For Chinese learners, they memorize a lot of words, but they fail to put these new words into practice. Therefore, when foreign language learners learn a new word, they should create a visual image of the word and connect the word with a real entity.

4.2 To Increase Awareness of Fossilization in Lexical Level.

It is impossible for foreign language learners to be aware of lexical fossilization at the early stage of foreign language learning. If the learners neglect lexical fossilization for a long time, it will lead to an irreversible situation. Thus, it is essential to strengthen the awareness of lexical fossilization among learners in order that they can reduce negative language transfer, and avoid bad habits being formed. It is not enough for learners themselves to increase awareness of lexical fossilization. The teacher's timely help is also significant. They should reinforce foreign language learners' awareness through continuous drills and practice. As to advanced learners who are totally aware of lexical fossilization, it is advisable for them to pay more attention to reducing the expansion of lexical fossilization and to consolidate the basic foundation.

5. Conclusion

On the basis of previous studies of fossilization abroad and at home, further research on lexical fossilization was made in this thesis. The simple introduction of the definition and categories of fossilization was necessary before the researches on lexical fossilization were made. Three kinds of causes of lexical fossilization were analyzed, and the urgent measures to reduce lexical fossilization were also put forward. Although we cannot eradicate lexical fossilization, we can reduce fossilization through the promotion of learner's motivation, the elimination of first language transfer, and the increase of awareness among foreign language learners.

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