Chapter 12
Phonetic Fossilization:
Is It a Matter of Perfection or Intelligibility?

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ABSTRACT

Fossilization is a common linguistic phenomenon among learners. It presents an obstacle that hinders the process of learning and prevents learners from acquiring the target language. The present chapter explores this phenomenon. It gives an overview of the theory of interlanguage and the concept of fossilization. The chapter presents the history of pronunciation teaching. It also reviews a previous study on pronunciation problems and fossilized errors that face learners of English as a second or a foreign language. The present chapter also raises an important question. It attempts to show the matter behind this linguistic phenomenon. There seems to be different views. Some researchers claim that phonetic fossilization is a matter of intelligibility. Other researchers state that achieving perfection in pronunciation is preferable. Another trend of researchers assumes that fossilization cannot be applied to the multilingual context.

INTRODUCTION

In second language acquisition, it has been claimed that L2 learners develop a unique linguistic system, different from both the first language and the Target Language (TL). This linguistic system is called approximative system (Nemser, 1971), idiosyncratic dialects or transitional dialects (Corder, 1971) and Interlanguage (IL) (Selinker, 1972). The present study mainly focuses on the theory of IL. This linguistic system should be developed to reach the TL. However, previous observations (Kahraman,

2012; Smaoui & Rahal 2015; Rahal, 2016) have demonstrated that L2 learners' IL systems often become fossilized and L2 learning process makes no further progress toward the TL. Fossilization can be temporary or permanent. The former refers to persistent errors that are destabilized after corrective feedback and exposure to L2 environment. The latter refers to stable and fixed errors in learners' IL over a period of time.

Fossilization is a linguistic phenomenon that hinders the process of learning and prevents learners from acquiring full level of competence. Many researchers studied fossilization (Han, 2004, 2005), the process of fossilization (Heath, 1998), causes of fossilization (Han, 2005; Wei, 2008), mainly biological factors (Liu, 2012), cognitive factors (Liu, 2012) and psychological factors of fossilization (Chen, 2009), as well as ways to overcome fossilization (Zheng, 2010; Demirezen, 2010; Li, 2009; Qian & Xiao, 2010; Smaoui & Rahal, 2015).

The aim of the present chapter is to address the problem of phonological fossilization by reviewing previous studies on pronunciation errors and persistent phonological errors. It is an attempt to understand this linguistic obstacle.

Interlanguage

The word interlanguage (IL) was advanced by Larry Selinker in 1972 in his eponymous paper *Interlanguage*. It is a central notion in the field of second language acquisition. Stern (1983) states:

The concept of Interlanguage was suggested by Selinker in order to draw attention to the possibility that the learner's language can be regarded as a distinct language variety or system with its own particular characteristics and rules. (as cited in Tanaka, 2000, p.1)

IL is seen as a unique linguistic system, independent in its own right. It differs from both the native language and the target language, but "linked to both native language and the TL by interlangual identifications in the perception of the learner", as Tarone states (2006, p. 749). This means that IL has some characteristics both from the native language and the target language. Selinker (1972) argues, "the sets of utterances from learners of a second language are not identical to the hypothesized corresponding sets of utterances which would have been produced by a native speaker of a target language had he attempted to express the same meaning as the learner" (p.214). Thus, IL is a type of language produced by non-native speakers in the process of learning a second language or a foreign language. IL also refers to "psychological structure latent in the brain" which is activated when one attempts to learn a second language (Selinker, 1972, p.34).

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