

Individual Paper Session 25
Processing and Syntax
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Second Language fossilization in adult migrants in Australia

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Fossilization is a wide-spread phenomenon in second language (SL) learning: the learner's second language "freezes" (sometimes well) before the learner has attained native competence in it, regardless of the fact that not infrequently favorable conditions for learning continue to exist. Fossilization as an SL phenomenon has been found to involve a range of rather special features which make it extremely difficult to describe and explain theoretically. Research has found that SL speakers often "fluctuate" (Long 2003) between correct and incorrect use of the same grammatical structure (also described as "stabilized variation over time" by Han 2000), which seems to suggest that fossilization affects grammatical structures at the level of the token, not the type. It is particularly challenging to offer a consistent theoretical account of such fluctuation.

The already complex picture of fossilization is additionally confounded by the methodological and practical difficulties involved in attesting fossilization empirically. It appears that fossilization can only be demonstrated to have taken place through a lengthy longitudinal study involving a careful selection of subjects according to a range of pre-specified criteria: e.g. length of residence in the SL country, exposure to sufficient relevant SL input, reasonable levels of motivation, etc. The paper presents results from the first phase of a longitudinal study of Australian migrants of non-English-speaking background (NESB) whose proficiency levels in English have remained below norm despite years of exposure to the SL.

The paper departs from commonly held views about the underlying causes of fossilization, such as lack of acculturation, communicative pressure, transfer, loss of sensitivity to SL input, etc., assuming that fossilization is more likely to be an aspect of SL performance rather than SL competence, and that the fluctuating linguistic behaviour associated with fossilization is probably the effect of language processing, rather than competence, deficiencies (Moskovsky 2004).