

INTERLANGUAGE FOSSILIZATION: ASOUTH AFRICAN PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

Selinker (1972) introduced the term interlanguage (IL) to describe the language system of a learner of a target language (TL) which in this case would be English. He regarded the language of such a learner as a separate linguistic system, namely an Interlanguage. Three aspects characterize this Interlanguage system: permeability, systematicity and fossilization. This system would have distinct features of both the TL and the learner's first language. Most researchers agree that this system is a systematic and permeable system, but there is no agreement among language researchers and teachers whether fossilization exists.

According to Selinker, however, Second Language (SL) learners fail to attain full Second Language competence. Those learners will have different internalised 'rules' than which exist in both the Target language (TL) and their mother tongue. These deviant structures would then be 'fossilized'. These fossilized structures may be on the level of pronunciation, vocabulary, syntax, etc. Many factors may lead to fossilization, like transfer of training (wrong teaching) and the influence of the mother tongue (language transfer).

The majority of students who enrol at the Central University of Technology to do a B.Ed with English as a major are not mother tongue speakers of English. This implies that their English is not up to the required level to teach English at school. This situation is exacerbated by the fact that the majority of these students were taught by teachers who are not mother tongue speakers of English and whose English is most probably characterized by various fossilized structures. This paper focuses on a study undertaken among 120 third year B.Ed English major students to determine the extent of fossilization and to identify aspects of the IL which has become so fossilized that they are regarded as features of Black South African English (BSAE). The study is a quantitative study and the data were collected by means of a grammaticality judgment test. In this type of test grammatically correct and incorrect sentences are jumbled and the students then have to identify which sentences are incorrect and correct them. The test consisted of 30 sentences (items). These sentences (both correct and incorrect) were taken from the written work of students. The study just focused on 8 aspects of the deviant structures often found in the written work of students. The results suggest that there are many structures which seem to be firmly embedded in the English of the students. The results of this study raise the question whether we are faced with the emergence of a distinct dialect, Black South African English.

Keywords: Interlanguage, Fossilization, Second Language Acquisition, Teacher Education

1. INTRODUCTION

In 1972 Selinker introduced the term 'Interlanguage' to refer to the learner's intermediate system while he/she is learning the target language (TL). He believes that the existence of such a system accounts for the fact that many Second Language (SL) learners fail to achieve full target language (TL) competence, regardless of what their Native Language (NL) is. Those learners will have different internalised 'rules' than which exist in both the Target language (TL) and their mother tongue. These deviant structures would then be 'fossilized'. These fossilized structures may be on the level of pronunciation, vocabulary, syntax, etc.

The majority of students who enrol at the Central University of Technology to do a B.Ed. with English as a major are not mother tongue speakers of English. This implies that their English is not up to the required level to teach English at school. This situation is exacerbated by the fact that the majority of these students were taught by teachers who are not mother tongue speakers of English and whose English is most probably characterized by various fossilized structures. This paper focuses on a study undertaken with 120 third year B.Ed. English major students to determine the extent of fossilization and to identify aspects of the IL, which has become so fossilized that they are regarded as features of Black South African English (BSAE).

The study is a quantitative study and the students (the population for the study) had to complete a grammaticality judgment task (GJT). In this type of test grammatically correct and incorrect sentences are jumbled and the students then have to identify which sentences are incorrect and correct them.

2. FOSSILIZATION AS A THEORETICAL CONSTRUCT

Selinker states that "fossilizable linguistic phenomena are linguistic items, rules, and subsystems which speakers of a particular NL will tend to keep in their IL relative to a particular TL, no matter what the ages of the learner or amount of explanation and instruction he receives in the TL" (Selinker 1972:215). In 1978 Selinker and Lamendella redefined fossilization as the permanent stopping of any further learning of the TL "in spite of the learner's ability, opportunity, and motivation to learn the TL and acculturate into the target society" (1978: 374). They regard fossilization as the permanent failure of most L2 learners to master all features of the TL (Vujisic 2010). There are many factors that may lead to fossilization, like transfer of training (wrong teaching) and the influence of the mother tongue (language transfer). Vujisic (2010) states that successful L2 acquisition is extremely rare, which may indicate that the permeability has been lost.

Selinker (1972:2) outlined five central process, which he believed are the causes of fossilization: language transfer, transfer of training, learning strategies, communication strategies and overgeneralisation. Selinker also noted that an entire IL competence may be fossilized, not only in the IL of individual speakers, which may ultimately result in a new dialect of the TL (Roodt 1993, Han 2013).

3. METHOD

3.1. The population

The population of this study consisted of 120 third year B. Ed students who all take English as one of their major subjects. They are all black students, and have the following languages as first languages: Sesotho, Setswana and a few speak IsiXhosa.

3.2. Data collection

The aim of this study was to determine whether certain structures in the Interlanguage (IL) of third year B.ED students at the Central University of Technology, Free State have been fossilized. A grammaticality judgement task (GJT) (Tarone & Jule 1989: 175), consisting of 30 items (correct,) were given to 120 third year B. ED students who take English as a major subject (Appendix A). In the task, they had to indicate which sentences they deemed as incorrect and then correct them. It was decided to use a test instead of doing an error analysis of written essays or spontaneous speech samples, because students may have avoided deviant structures that form part of their IL. The latter methods to gather data are also time consuming and financially challenging, and therefore many researchers resort to grammaticality judgement tasks (GJT's) (Lakshmanan & Selinker 2001). Han (2006: 76) states "The study...demonstrates that the GJ methodology is a viable alternative for studying fossilization. In terms of tapping into L2 knowledge of English unaccusatives, the GJ data appeared to be more sensitive and effective than naturalistic production inasmuch as they provided a more sophisticated picture". According to Gutiérrez (2103), GJ tests/tasks are more viable to administer in the case of large groups of learners.

"Grammaticality judgment tests usually consist of a number of grammatical and ungrammatical sentences, and learners are asked to determine whether those sentences are well formed or deviant" (Gutiérrez 2013:

426). Students are usually expected to indicate and then to correct the error and sometimes to explain the rule regarding the correction of the error.

For the purposes of this paper, only the items that relate to language transfer (mother tongue interference) and transfer of training (wrong teaching) will be discussed in depth. Language transfer is, according to Selinker (1972), the first process, which may cause fossilization. This happens when elements of another language are applied to the TL. One example is that black students tend to pluralise abstract nouns as if they are countable, as most of the African languages do not distinguish clearly between those nouns (Roodt 1993: 22). Transfer of training refers to teacher-induced errors. The majority of teachers who teach English in South African schools are not mother tongue speakers of the language and therefore may not use Standard English.

The following categories pertaining to the two causes mentioned above were included in the test:

3.3. Language Transfer

1 Pluralisation of uncountable abstract nouns.

Please give me advices on how to tackle this problem.

He bought very nice furniture for his new house.

2 The resumptive pronoun

My daughter she has to walk very far to school every day.

The boys they play outside the house.

3 Overuse of the Progressive Tenses

I am having three children.

Racism is existing in our country.

4 No distinction between his/ her pronouns

Mary did not want to lend me his dress that she bought for herself that morning.

3.4. Articles

I am waiting to get good news.

Smoking constitutes health risk.

Transfer of Training

1. Wrong pronunciation which leads to wrong spelling

He leaves in Cape Town, but was born in Pretoria.

These person has a serious problem.

2. Deviant use of prepositions

We discussed about the work in class.

I cannot cope up with the workload.

3. Redundant constructions

I can be able to do the work.

I am a kind of person who likes to dance.

4. RESULTS

In this article, the focus is only on the few items that are mentioned above. The results, as presented in Table 1, indicate how many of the students regarded the above items as correct.

Category	Percentage of students who regarded the incorrect structures as correct.
Language Transfer	
Pluralisation: Please give me advices on how to tackle this problem.	82,2%
I am doing researches for my studies.	79,3%
He bought very nice furnitures for his new house.	83,6%
Resumptive pronoun My daughter she has to walk very far to school every day.	78,6%
The boys they play outside the house	77,4%
Present Progressive Tense I am having three children.	65,3%
Racism is existing in our country.	71,4%
No distinction between his/ her pronouns Mary did not want to lend me his dress that she bought for herself that morning.	78,5%
Articles Smoking constitutes health risk.	81,4%
I am waiting to get a good news.	83,2%
Transfer of Training	
Wrong pronunciation which leads to wrong spelling He leaves in Cape Town, but was born in Pretoria.	78,8%
These person has a serious problem.	87,2%
I cannot cope up with the workload.	76,5%
Redundant constructions I can be able to do the work.	74,6%
I am a kind of person who likes to dance.	56,7%

5. DISCUSSION

It is not always possible to determine what the source of each persistent erroneous expression is (Roodt 1993). The problem with the correct use of articles is similar in what Kirk-Greene remarks about Nigerian English in that it does not use articles correctly and it may be as a result of “local transference” (1971:96). Concerning the pluralisation of uncountable nouns, Bokamba (1982:82) also notes that this is a feature of African English.

Likewise, Bokamba (1982:83) regards the use of the resumptive pronoun as a feature of African English as a result of the redundancy found in the subject-verb agreement system in Bantu languages. The extension of progressive tenses to stative verbs is regarded as a prominent feature of BSAE (Roodt 1993; Makalela 2007), therefore we would get expressions like *I am having a problem*.

Makalela (2007:140) indicates that the conflation of masculine and feminine pronouns can be traced back to the fact that gender is not marked in the Bantu languages.

The majority of English teachers in South Africa are not mother tongue speakers of English and therefore deviant pronunciation is a problem, especially when it leads to wrong spelling. Spencer (1971:30) writes about the use of wrong prepositions in West African English and ascribes it to wrong teaching.

6. CONCLUSION

The results of the above seem to indicate that the mentioned aspects of the students' IL seem to have fossilized. Vujisic (2010:71) is concerned about the time span: “How long is long enough to call an item

stable...?" In the case of this study, it has to be borne in mind that these students have had at least 10 years of English teaching, but because of the historical segregation in South Africa, most of them come from disadvantaged schools and had not been taught by mother tongue speakers or competent English teachers.

The scope of this English paper does not allow for a lengthy discussion of the implications of the above persistence in the errors of black students' English. Various researchers (Roodt 1993; De Klerk 1999; Makalela 2007) regard these fossilized items as features of South African Black English (SABE), a so-called 'New English'. De Klerk (1999:311) defines BSAE "as the variety of English commonly used by mother-tongue speakers of South Africa's indigenous African languages". In order to determine whether these structures (and others not discussed in this paper), a more representative population sample should be involved and a longitudinal study should be undertaken.

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APPENDIX A

Grammar test

Read the following sentences and correct them if necessary write down the corrected sentence next to the appropriate number: (A sentence may be correct, or may have more than one error).

- 1 Please give me advices on how to tackle this problem.
- 2 Business has been quiet lately.
- 3 He bought very nice furniture for his new house.
- 4 There is enough vacant land, which could be used for sports facilities.
- 5 I can be able to do the work.
- 6 One must do one's best.
- 7 I am having three children.
- 8 Smoking constitutes health risk.
- 9 He passed his Matric last year.
- 10 I wanted to study at a tertiary institution.
- 11 My daughter she has to walk very far to school every day.
- 12 These people have a serious problem.
- 13 My mother is having only Grade 8.
- 14 I am a kind of person who likes to dance.
- 15 We discussed about the work in class.
- 16 After the match, he was very tired.
- 17 I am waiting to get good news.
- 18 I love playing with my little sister.
- 19 I cannot cope up with the workload.
- 20 I can be able to do the work.
- 21 If Mpho were more diligent, he could have passed.
- 22 I studied very hard for the test and excelled.
- 23 Last night I put my bags in the car.
- 24 He leaves in Cape Town, but was born in Pretoria.
- 25 The boys they play outside the house.
- 26 Mary and my sister have always been friends.
- 27 Racism is existing in our country.
- 28 I like to play soccer in the heat of the afternoon.
- 29 Mary did not want to lend me his dress that she bought for herself that morning.
- 30 Tom must put more effort into his studies.