

Deconstructing Pragmatic Fossilization: A Re-Examination of Interlanguage Stability and Variability in Late-Stage L2 Acquisition

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Abstract. Pragmatic fossilization—the cessation of developmental change in second-language pragmatic competence—has long been theorized within static, deficit-oriented frameworks that inadequately account for the dynamic interplay between sociocognitive factors and target-language input. This study re-examines the theoretical construct of pragmatic fossilization by integrating Dynamic Systems Theory (DST) with cross-linguistic pragmatic transfer analysis across three typologically distinct language pairs. Drawing on longitudinal oral corpus data from 187 advanced L2 speakers over 36 months, we demonstrate that purportedly fossilized pragmatic features exhibit measurable micro-variability under specific interactional conditions. Our findings challenge the terminological and conceptual validity of "fossilization" as a stable end-state, proposing instead a model of constrained pragmatic adaptability. These results carry significant implications for instructed second language acquisition (ISLA) pedagogy and computational pragmatics.

Keywords: pragmatic fossilization, interlanguage pragmatics, Dynamic Systems Theory in SLA, cross-linguistic pragmatic transfer, second language acquisition, pragmatic variability, constrained adaptability model, longitudinal corpus linguistics, instructed second language acquisition

Introduction

The concept of pragmatic fossilization has occupied a contentious yet foundational position within second language acquisition (SLA) research since Selinker's (1972) seminal articulation of interlanguage theory. Broadly defined, fossilization refers to the persistent stabilization of non-target-like linguistic features in a second-language learner's competence, regardless of continued exposure to input, corrective feedback, or explicit instruction. When this phenomenon is transposed to the pragmatic domain—encompassing speech act realization, discourse organization, politeness strategies, and implicature

processing—it raises acutely complex questions about the upper boundaries of pragmatic development and the sociolinguistic conditions that either constrain or facilitate it. The relevance of this inquiry has intensified considerably in the current period (2024–2026), driven by two converging global pressures. First, the proliferation of multilingual digital communication environments, including AI-mediated language interfaces, has fundamentally altered the ecology of L2 pragmatic exposure, creating non-canonical input conditions that existing fossilization frameworks were never designed to model. Second, the exponential growth of transnational academic and professional mobility has generated vast populations of advanced L2 users whose pragmatic non-nativeness carries measurable social and institutional consequences—from misattributed impoliteness in academic peer review to miscommunication in high-stakes intercultural negotiation contexts. Despite this urgency, the theoretical apparatus used to describe and explain pragmatic fossilization remains largely anchored in cognitive-individualist models that treat inter-speaker variability as noise rather than signal. A central problem with dominant accounts is their reliance on cross-sectional data interpreted through a binary fossilized/non-fossilized lens, effectively obscuring the micro-level developmental flux that longitudinal, usage-based methodologies are uniquely positioned to detect. Recent advances in corpus-assisted pragmatics and Dynamic Systems Theory (DST) have begun to challenge this reductionism, yet a comprehensive reconceptualization of pragmatic fossilization—one that integrates systemic variability, sociocognitive load, and cross-linguistic structural proximity—remains conspicuously absent from the literature. The present study addresses this lacuna directly. By applying a DST-informed analytical framework to a 36-month longitudinal spoken corpus spanning three typologically distinct language pairings (Japanese–English, Arabic–French, and Hungarian–Spanish), we interrogate the empirical basis for classifying advanced learners' pragmatic behavior as fossilized, and we propose a revised construct—constrained pragmatic adaptability—that better captures the attested patterns of variability and contextual sensitivity. The article proceeds as follows: Section 2 reviews the theoretical genealogy of fossilization and its extension to pragmatic competence; Section 3 details the corpus design, participant selection criteria, and analytical methodology; Section 4 presents quantitative and qualitative findings organized by language pair and pragmatic domain; Section 5 develops the constrained pragmatic adaptability model and situates it within current ISLA pedagogy and computational pragmatics; and Section 6 concludes with reflections on terminological reform and directions for future empirical research.

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