ECOLINGUISTICS

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Summary

Ecolinguistics links the study of language with ecology. This is done in two ways: on the one hand, 'ecology' is used metaphorically for a study of the dynamic processes which can be observed in language contact situations on both the societal and the individual levels; on the other hand, ecolinguistics analyses environmental discourse from a critical point of view. In both strands of ecolinguistics, the term 'ecological' is understood to mean 'focusing on interrelation and diversity'. The article first discusses types of language contact with particular emphasis on issues concerning maintenance and loss of linguistic and cultural diversity. Then the discourse critical strand of ecolinguistics is discussed and shown to be concerned with both the language system and discourse as text.

Critique of the language system points at ideologies entrenched in the system, such as growthism, anthropocentrism, and the fragmentation of processes, while the critique of discourse as text focuses on euphemizing and distancing strategies in various kinds of texts, with which the human use of 'Nature' is legitimized. In one section, the discourse

of advertizing is given special attention, while the interrelation between environmental discourse and meta-discourse is presented as a new research area. Finally, the article shows future perspectives of ecolinguistics, such as the investigation of the economic side of language diversity, the relation between bio-diversity and linguistic diversity, and lastly the connexions between diversity, conflict and peace.

1. Introduction

At the beginning of the 20th century, linguists began to take an interest in the connexions between language and the environment. The American linguist Edward Sapir, in an article titled "language and environment" and published in 1912 in *American Anthropologist*, showed how languages are influenced by their 'environment', i.e. the geographical and topographical surroundings of their speakers. Almost a hundred years before Sapir, the German philosopher and philologist Wilhelm von Humboldt had already addressed the question of language diversity, which he saw as an enormous potential for the development of human ideas and for providing 'energies' for interpreting the world. It was these two authors who laid the groundwork for the modern study of ecolinguistics.

The term 'ecology' was introduced into linguistics by Einar Haugen, an American linguist of Norwegian parentage, who, in 1970, gave a talk on "The Ecology of Language", which was published two years later in a volume of the same title. Language ecology was defined by Haugen as "the study of interactions between any given language and its environment", this environment being both the society that uses the language and the human mind in which it may be surrounded by other languages.

Haugen transferred 'ecology' metaphorically from biology to languages, but did not yet link language with biological ecology and ecological or environmental problems. This was first done by the English linguist Michael Halliday, who, in 1990, read a paper to the World Conference of Applied Linguistics (AILA) at Thessaloniki (Greece), in which he defined "the challenge to Applied Linguistics" as to explore how language construes the world thus creating dangers to human and non-human life on this planet. Among these dangers, he listed classism, growthism, destruction of species, and pollution. Halliday thus pioneered the study of the connexion between language and environmental problems, and, going beyond this, between language, conflict and peace. This second link between language and ecology has in the mean time led to a body of work in eco-criticism, in which both the language system and its manifestation in various strands of discourse are criticized as unecological and thus carrying some of the responsibility for environmental degradation in all of its forms.

The term "ecolinguistics" (which is not yet listed in the OED [Jan. 2005]) was probably first used in 1985 in the French form *écolinguistique*, by the French linguist Claude Hagège. In his book *l'homme de parole,* Hagège defined *écolinguistique* as "the study of the linguistic representation of natural phenomena". Hagège's definition would today only refer to one part of the whole study (see 4. below). In its present comprehensive sense, "ecolinguistics" was used for the first time by a group of enthusiasts around Frans Verhagen, who in 1990 organized some meetings on ecological aspects of linguistics at the AILA conference in Thessaloniki. Ecolinguistics, understood in this

sense, faces a double challenge: on the one hand, to investigate the contacts between languages (in both society and the human mind) and explore the causes and circumstances of language diversity with a strong emphasis on saving small and endangered languages; on the other hand, to explore the ecological and unecological elements of language systems, look at the linguistic representation of the environment, and take a critical view of texts relating to the role of humans in the natural world.

2. Theoretical Basis of ecolinguistics

Ecolinguistics is based on the concept of 'ecology', which was introduced by the German biologist Ernst Haeckel around 1865. Haeckel coined the term 'ecology' (from Greek *oikos* = dwelling place, and *logos* = word, science) for the study of the interrelations between the different species and between organisms and their natural environment. Ecology soon developed into a separate branch of biology in which special emphasis was laid on the different relationships between animals and plants (e.g. feeder – fodder, predator – prey relationships etc.) and in which the bio-diversity of the earth was studied.

In the 20th century, when problems of overpopulation, pollution and destruction of species began to be recognized as threats, ecology began to adopt the meaning of a (healthy) network (or dynamic system) of relations between living beings which was increasingly in danger of getting destabilized and which it was the task of scientists to save. Ecology, in a sense, developed into a movement in favor of saving threatened species, using resources sparingly and 'sustainably' and generally maintaining the 'bio-diversity' of this planet. Today, ecological still embraces these meanings, but in a more general sense stresses the interaction between all beings while recognising the relations between individuals (big and small) and the context they exist in, and being in favour of diversity (as opposed to unification, levelling and globalisation).

When Haugen first used 'ecology' as a metaphor in linguistics, he formulated ten questions which all have to do with the position of a language in relation to other languages, with its different varieties, its status in a society, its overlap with other languages and the degree of bilingualism of its users. However, he was already aware of the more 'ideological' meaning of 'ecology' when he suggested "that ecology is not just the name of a descriptive science, but in its application has become the banner of a movement for environmental sanitation." Haugen also addressed the role of small languages and thus anticipated some of the topics which later became the central areas of ecolinguistic research.

Another metaphor which has become current in ecolinguistics of the Haugenian tradition is that of the eco-system, a concept first introduced by A.G. Tansley in 1935, which was transferred to the relation between language and world. "Language world systems", as they are called in ecolinguistics, are cultural systems created in an evolutionary process; the interaction within these systems occurs in such a way that languages on the one hand influence (perhaps even construe) the world for us, but on the other hand are shaped by their environment (= the situation in which they are used, the current trends of thought etc.). Again there is a tendency to stress the threat under which these language world systems are in our modern world, in which economy is

placed high above ecology – a threat which specifically concerns the creativity of languages and the diversity of their means of expression.

In a further extension of the ecological metaphor, such topics as the contribution of language to conflict and peace or to an equal treatment of the genders have also been dealt with under the label of 'ecolinguistics'. The linguistic side of 'eco-feminism' could, in this wider understanding, be regarded as an area of ecolinguistics. However, in recent years there has been a tendency to restrict ecolinguistics to its two topics as initiated by Haugen and Halliday and to resists efforts to include further topics, which would only turn ecolinguistics into a cover-all kind of study.

The critical branch of ecolinguistics in the Hallidayan tradition has its theoretical basis in the belief in a certain (weakly Whorfian) interaction between language, thought and reality. Languages are thought to have developed in a long evolutionary process whose aim was the proliferation of humans over the world, making the description (or rather construction) of the world for the best use by humans a principle of this development. The resulting 'anthropocentrism' of languages (which name the phenomena of the world according to their usefulness for humans) is now thought to have served its purpose and thus to be outdated, while still exercising an influence on our way of thinking and shaping our behaviour with regard to Nature. One of the tasks of ecolinguistics, in this understanding, is to create an awareness of linguistic anthropocentrism, while the postulate of an 'eco-political correctness' (involving changes in language use) is rejected by most ecolinguists.

3. Ecology as Metaphor – the Haugenian paradigm

Languages have frequently been compared to organisms which grow, have a life of their own and may die from a number of causes – among them suppression by governments, but also natural extinction through the death of the last speakers. What is new about Haugen's ecological metaphor is that it compares languages not to individual living beings, but rather to whole species, and that it shows languages as existing not in isolation, but in their 'environment' -- as part of an ecological system with all its interrelations and its forms of equilibrium, which may be stable or in danger of getting destabilised. This environment of a language is of a twofold nature: on the one hand, it is the other languages spoken in a society and the culture of this society, on the other hand it is the languages interacting in the speaker's mind. Language contacts can thus be divided into societal (3.1 below) and individual (3.4) ones.

Haugen's metaphor has been reasonably successful as a paradigm for investigating the different contacts between languages. As such, it has been integrated into the wider area of 'ecolinguistics' as one of its two strands. 'The ecology of language' paradigm sees language not as a structure (of phonologic, syntactic and lexical elements), but as a dynamic force which plays an important role in the interaction between cultures as well as between thought systems and the world. Among the authors who have used this paradigm are William F. Mackey, Norman Denison, Salikoko S. Mufwene, Harald Haarmann, Peter Mühlhäusler, David Crystal, Tove Skutnabb-Kangas and Robert Phillipson. The following section summarizes the most important work based on the ecological metaphor.

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