



Ecological approaches in linguistics: a historical overview



Hildo Honório do Couto

Department of Linguistics, University of Brasília, 70910-900 Brasília, Brazil

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ABSTRACT

The first objective of this paper is to give an historical overview of ecolinguistics, beginning with a discussion of its affinity with ecology. Then the paper presents some of the precursors of ecolinguistics, going onto the emergence of the discipline in the 1970s. Further, it gives a general conspectus of ecolinguistics as it exists today, including some of the most important ecolinguistics groups, events, and publications as well as individual investigators. Finally, it discusses the idea of ecolinguistics as a paradigm for the sciences of language, suggesting that it would probably be preferable to see it as a platform from which we could study any language phenomena from a unified point of view.

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1. Introduction

Einar Haugen, at the beginning of the 1970s, defined “ecology of language” and “language ecology” as “the study of interactions between any given language and its environment” (Haugen, 1972: 325). Since the end of that decennium, ecolinguistics has been defined as the study of “the (inter-)relationships between language and (its) environment”. All these alternative formulations of the definition have important implications. Some of them could be subsumed under the following questions:

- (1) What is language?
- (2) What is the environment of language?
- (3) What are the (inter-)relationships between language and environment?
- (4) Do these relations take place between language and its environment or between language and environment in general (environmentalism)?
- (5) Are the influences between language and environment unidirectional or bidirectional?

Due to space limitations, it will not be possible to answer all these questions. What I give in several places below is some brief suggestions of answers to some of them, although each one of them could be the subject of a whole essay.

Ecolinguistics is a relatively new discipline. According to Makkai (1993: 8), it “is merely *in statu nascendi* and has a long way to go before it can fulfill any of its own goals and aspirations”. Nowadays, this seems not to be valid any more. The simple fact that we are dedicating a volume of this journal to it is proof of the contrary. It is true that it is not a unified enterprise. However, there are many points of view which, in my opinion, are a sign of its vitality.

This essay is an attempt at giving an historical overview of the new discipline of ecolinguistics. Some authors have already outlined its short history. The first of them is one of its most important figures, namely Fill (1993, 1998/2001). The second is Verhagen (2000). Mühlhäusler (2003) contains a chapter entitled “Towards a history of ecolinguistics”. Calvet’s (1999) “Introduction” also has some information on the subject. Finally, Couto (2007a) includes a whole chapter dealing with it.

E-mail address: hiho@unb.br

2. Ecolinguistics and ecology

As pointed out by Fill (1996: 17), “some ecolinguists start at the ecology end and transfer ecological principles to language, while others start at the language end and bring linguistics to ecology”. This means that ecolinguistics is intimately intertwined with ecology one way or the other. Unfortunately, in both ways, ecolinguists run the risk of reifying language, i.e., of considering it a thing located somewhere and related to its environment. However, if we depart from the central concept of ecology, ecosystem, we have a way out of this reification. Ecosystem consists of a population of organisms, living in their territory (environment), and the inter-relationships that obtain between the organisms and the environment as well as between members of the population. One of the most important features of any ecosystem is the diversity of species living in it. The greater the diversity, the stronger the system is. Let us now turn to some of the linguistic homologues of these ecological concepts.

The equivalent of ecosystem in language studies is the **linguistic ecosystem**, which is more commonly called speech/language community. The equivalent of population of organisms is people or **population**, living in its **territory**. The ecological inter-relationships (behavior) are equivalent to **language**. In other words, from this point of view language is a network of interactions, not a thing. These interactions may take place between members of the population and the world, in the neuronal connections of the brain and between language and society. Language as interaction is implicit in Humboldt's *energeia* (*Tätigkeit*), in the works of Eugenio Coseriu as well as in Lamb's stratificational grammar, now called neurocognitive linguistics. In summary, all interactionists, as opposed to formalists, see language as activity, and grammar as a part of it. In this case, the environment of language is where these inter-relationships take place. In other words, inside this basic linguistic ecosystem, the world (including its population) constitutes the **natural environment of language**.

A second way of seeing the relationship between language and its environment was mentioned by Haugen, who said that “language exists only in the minds of its users”. This is also the case with the rationalist philosophy, including Chomsky's generative grammar. In this case, language is seen as a mental phenomenon, and the brain/mind constitutes the **mental environment of language**.

A third way of interpreting the relationships between language and environment is the one preferred by Haugen (1972: 325). According to him, “the true environment of language is the society that uses it as one of its codes”. This is essentially what is done by present-day sociolinguistics, of which Haugen himself was one of the most prominent representatives. Discourse analysis, among others, is also one of these approaches. Here society is the **social environment of language**.

These three environments of language are reminiscent of Døør's and Bang's (1996: 23) three dimensions of bio-logics (natural), ideo-logics (mental) and socio-logics (social). It also has something to do with Peter Finke's and Wilhelm Trampe's *Sprache-Welt-System*. It is also implied in Fill's (1993: 4) definition of ecolinguistics. For more discussion on these environments of language, see Couto (2007a,b, 2009).

In view of what has just been said, it is important to make clear which environment we are referring to when we define ecolinguistics as the study of the relationships between language and environment. We have seen that there are at least the natural, the mental and the social environments of language. In this case, we do not run the risk of falling into ecologism nor of doing social Darwinism, a danger pointed out by deep ecology's creator Arne Naess. According to this view, language is seen as a network of inter-relationships. Fill (1993: 5) said that “Strukturalismus untersucht und beschreibt den Zustand des Wassers beim Staudamm (Synchronie) oder die Entwicklung einer Welle auf dem Fluss (Diachronie), Ökologie betrachtet das Fließen selbst”. Ecolinguistics homologizes to this flowing, not to organisms or species.

There are those investigators who do not mention ecology, even if they deal with environmental questions or environmentalism. Implicitly, however, most of their research has to do with diversity (of species, behavior, languages, dialects, cultures, ideologies, etc.), which is a vital property of ecosystems. In what follows, I will consider as ecolinguist any investigator who acknowledges that he/she is doing ecolinguistics, or is using ecological concepts in his/her linguistic research and/or is dealing with environmental questions in relation to language.

3. Precursors of ecolinguistics

It is usual to look for the origins of a new discipline in ancient Greek philosophy. It is true that some ideas of ecolinguistics were already present in thinkers such as Heraclitus and Plato (in his *Cratylus*), among other ancient philosophers who dealt with the relation between language and world, or between word and thing. The whole metaphysical tradition saw language this way. However, we need not go so far back in time. We could begin with Humboldt (1767–1835), as has been done by some ecolinguists. We could even include some later developments of his ideas, as for instance Leo Weisgerber's *Inhaltsbezogene Grammatik* and Jost Trier's field theory. There is also the dialectological and the language-geographic research which leads to the linguistic atlases. The school known as *Wörter und Sachen* is especially important in this regard.

Closer to our times is Alfred Korzybski's (1879–1950) general semantics, with detailed reflections on the relationship between language and the world. He used to say that the map is not the territory, but a human representation of it. In the United States there is the movement that began with Franz Boas (1858–1942), went on with Sapir (1888–1939), and Benjamin Whorf (1897–1941), ending up in the well-known Sapir–Whorf Hypothesis.

Towards the second quarter of the 20th century we have the research of the two Romanian linguists Tatiana Slama-Cazacu and Eugenio Coseriu. The former published the book *Language and context* in 1959, which Couto (1999) considered

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