ECOLOGICAL AS A SCIENCE FOR PEACE
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ABSTRACT: An important topic of ecologistics is the role of language in counteracting the ‘climate change’. Another one is its role in maintaining and creating peace all over the world. ‘Peace Linguistics’ deal particularly with the topics of growth is man thinking in contrasts, both of which are anchored in our Western languages. Michael Halliday (2001) wrote that “language promotes the ideology of growth” of anything human at the cost of nature or what we call the environment. The growth-word is always the neutral word: “how high is the mountain” – never ‘how low’, “how fast is the car” – never ‘how slow’. However, the ideology of growth is counterproductive to creating peace, because each nation and each group wants to grow at the expense of its neighbors, which may lead to violence and war. A second line of thinking also based on our languages is our thinking in opposites. Our languages contain hundreds of word contrasts (large: small, young : old, friend : enemy etc.). Thus, language makes us think that the world consists of opposites, which is counter-productive to creating peace. We should be aware that between these contrasts there are ‘intermediate values’, e.g. ‘of giant size’, ‘medium size’, ‘rather small’ and ‘tiny’. Ecolinguists have so far investigated how European languages deal with the environment. In this talk, I would like to suggest looking at the languages of other continents, particularly of Africa. Some Nigerian languages do not preach growthism and thinking in contrasts, but show degrees and do not polarize; they are therefore more peaceful.

Key words: peace linguistics, growthism, Nigerian languages, opposites, intermediate values

INTRODUCTION

2020 is the year in which three topics have dominated the media (tv, newspapers etc.) and politics: number one was the new virus, which hit the world – the corona virus. The second one was the refugees who came from Turkey to Greece and who wanted to be welcomed so that they could settle somewhere in Europe. The third one was the climate change – although in comparison with the two other topics, this one has gone somewhat into the background. The topic, however, which to me overshadows all others, is peace – what can language, what can linguistics contribute to the creation or maintenance of peace.

Language, war and rebellion: growthism

What is the cause of war and of rebellion? It is the wish and the ambition of certain people and certain groups of people to have more power, to enlarge the area in which they dominate and to increase the region in which they have power. My argument here is that language contributes to this to a certain extent and that we have to make people aware of this. Of course, it is not the guilt of language itself – language alone is not the cause of rebellion and war. The cause is the inner emotions and inner wishes of people, particularly men, to enlarge their power; but this expresses itself in language and by making people aware of this, the consequences of this could be avoided.

One of the founders of ecolinguistics, Michael Halliday (who died three years ago), was one of the first to see this link between language and war. In 1990, Halliday gave a very important talk in Thessaloniki (Greece), which was published several times and is also contained in The Ecolinguistics Reader (edited by Peter Mühlhäusler and myself in 2001). Halliday shows that what he calls ‘growthism’ is contained in our languages, in which the size of everything is expressed with the ‘growth word’. We say “how high is the mountain?” (not how low), “how fast is the car?” (not how slow), “how big is the house?” (not how small), and we do not even notice that we use the growth word as the neutral nomination. ’The grammar of ‘big’ is the grammar of ‘good’,
while the grammar of ‘small’ is the grammar of ‘bad’. The motif of ‘bigger and better’ is engraved into our consciousness by virtue of their lineup in the grammar” (Halliday 2001, p.194).

Halliday (2001, p. 193) gives examples of this, e.g. *unmatched growth rates, traffic is expected to grow, population growth* (all positively marked), “Insects may provide the vital factor in making Australia a world leader on sustainable development” (2001, p.195, from an Australian newspaper), whereas something like *output fell sharply* is of course negative. Halliday even suggests using *shrink* as the positive word and even redefining ‘growth’ as ‘failure to shrink’ (ibid.); perhaps here he is going a little too far. With the following sentence, however, I agree full-heartedly:

“These and other features of the language system construe our experience in such a way that we believe we can expand for ever – our own numbers, our own power and dominance over other species, our own consumption and so-called ‘standard of living’. (Halliday, 2001,p.198)

The Rise of Ecolinguistics

The present author sees the rise of ecolinguistics as part of evolution, which thanks to ecolinguistics has taken a turn and is now going into a new direction, no longer towards making everything larger, faster and more numerous, but in the direction of saving the earth. One could indeed call this new direction of Evolution a positive ‘development’, in so far as this development concerns improvement of quality and distribution, not just of quantity. For instance, we should no longer aim at producing more and more food, but we should aim at distributing the food more evenly and equally. As Arran Stibbe writes, we should try “to be more rather than have more” (Stibbe, 2015, p 2). “Small is beautiful” is a slogan which not only would help humanity to prevent climate change, but which also would prevent conflicts between ethnic groups and finally prevent war.

*Small is Beautiful* is also the title of a book by E. F. Schumacher, which he wrote in 1973 (in England).

Growing to a certain aim is possible, but not an unlimited general growth. It is more than possible, as Gandhi said, that the earth offers enough to satisfy the need of every human, but not peoples’ greed and avarice. (Schumacher, 1985, p. 19)

The past American president Trump was one who wanted to make his empire larger – when for instance in 2019, he wanted to integrate Greenland into the United States. Political growthism is also present in the so-called near East, where several leaders wish to integrate parts of neighboring countries into their own realm.

“Language actively creates reality” (Halliday 2001, p.179). This is why linguistics is a power in society. “Our ‘reality’ is not something readymade and waiting to be meant – it has to be actively construed; […] language evolved in the process of, and as agency of, its construal.” (ibid.)

“Our grammar construes ‘air’ and ‘water’ and ‘soil’, and also ‘coal’ and ‘iron’ and ‘oil’, as ‘unbounded’ – that is, as existing without limit. We know that such resources are finite” (Halliday 2001: 194) – but we act as if what our grammar suggests were true. An awareness of this power of language would also slow down climate change and the waste of resources.

So much about the power of language. It is the task of linguists to make language users aware of this and to show how this awareness could diminish the negative (!)power of language (and of our thoughts which have led to this).

Non-European Languages

So far, this author has been talking about European languages, particularly English. However, in Ecolinguistics we should also consider the languages of other continents, e.g. those of Africa. Nigeria has about 500 languages, the most important of these being Edo, Efik, Adamaua-ulufulde, Hausa, Idoma, Igbo, Central Yoruba (National or official languages). One topic of ecolinguistics should be to investigate how these languages present what is called the environment and how they deal with animals,
for instance. It would also be very interesting to investigate these languages concerning growthism and contrasting words. I have read that in some Nigerian languages (e.g. Yoruba) there is no polarization between good and evil. Here, a new and very interesting topic opens up for ecologists. I have also seen a video about animal names in Yoruba, which are also interesting, e.g. Pepeye – duck; kezekeze – donkey. Some of these words are obviously onomatopoeic and not anthropomorphic, as they are in European languages!

Language and war: contrasts

A second kind of thinking and acting that comes from our Western languages is thinking in contrasts. I am talking here about the so-called SAE languages (standard average European languages). Benjamin Lee Whorf (1956) has shown that for instance the Hopi language expresses things differently because the Hopi think differently and therefore also act differently. As has just been mentioned, some African languages also do not express everything through contrasts.

But the SAE languages contain hundreds of contrasting adjectives (large – small, fast – slow, high – low, old – young), contrasting nouns (friend – foe, man – woman) and contrasting verbs (come – go, rise – set, love – hate, live – die); this makes us think that the world is made up of contrasts. We do not realize that these contrasts are just simplifications of reality. ‘Large’ – ‘small’ simplifies the fact that sizes have no contrasts or extremes; ‘friend’ – ‘foe’ polarizes the many relations which exist between human beings. This contrast is particularly dangerous, and therefore it is suggested using at least three stages instead of friend and foe, viz. ‘like-minded’, ‘similar-minded’ and ‘unlike-minded’ person. We see that we could use language in a way which is much closer to reality – however, we frequently use the simplifying expressions which make it appear that the world lives on contrasts.

We should also speak in a linear way rather than in a polar way. What is called good and evil have probably come into our thinking through our religions. People in China do not think in ‘either : or’, but rather in ‘both … and’ or ‘not only, but also’. Ecolinguistics can make people aware of these different ways of thinking and can thus contribute to peace in our world.

So far, this author has been talking about peace between nations and states. Peace linguistics, however, may also help to bring about peace between individual people. This topic is particularly embraced by the Brazilian peace linguist Francisco Gomes de Matos (Recife, Brazil). Another peace linguist is Patricia Friedrich, a professor at the Arizona state University. Together with Gomes de Matos, she edited the book Nonkilling Linguistics. Practical Applications (Honolulu, 2012). Together they have written a chapter “Towards a Nonkilling Linguistics”, which is also available in the net:

(http://w.nonkilling.org/pdf/nklinguistics.pdf)

One thing is clear: it is not enough to avoid such words as kill, weapons or violence. In an interview towards the end of the book, Gomes de Matos gives a list of what to do to bring about peace in everyday conversation (12 pieces of advice - only three will be mentioned):

1. Express your opinion/view respectfully. How do you introduce your ideas?
2. Disagree respectfully. What dignifying expressions do you use?
3. Refer to your interlocutor’s opinion/view positively. (As a “contribution”, for instance)

The present author would like to add to this:

Do not make fun of another person (e.g. your partner), so that he or she appears to be ridiculous. This might bring about revengeful action and thus lead to quarrel.

As has been said, this is a somewhat different topic from peace between nations, but it is also important for showing the power of language concerning individual conflicts. Besides, the pieces of advice concerning
individual people might also be valid for larger groups (e.g. religions) or even nations. In both cases, a certain ‘ecoliteracy’ concerning the role of language in creating peaceful thinking is important. (cf. Capra, 1997)

The Future of Ecolinguistics

In an interview with the Brazilian linguist Hildo Honorio do Couto (do Couto, 2018, p.112), Alwin Fill said: “Ecolinguistics will deal with new topics such as text-image combinations, films, TV programs and social media.” However, its most important future will be (1) to investigate the ecological relation between Ecolinguistics itself and its effect on human thought and action, which could be said to form a new ‘ecosystem’, and (2) its influence on political and economic decisions. Ecolinguistics could thus become a science which creates peace through language – in the sense of Francisco Gomes de Matos.

Another point – which was made in Fill’s talk at the last Ecolinguistics conference in Odense – is that we should be aware that the word ‘environment’ (in German Umwelt) suggests that we humans are in the middle, and around us is the environment which we can use – animals, plants, trees etc. Fill suggested using the word “conenvironment” instead, to show that we are part of Nature.

The term ‘conenvironment’ takes me now to my final point concerning language and peace. The aborigines in Australia say that they do not own the territory, but the territory owns them! They do not believe in possessing ground, and therefore there are no wars between the different groups. However, they have myths about previous times in which individuals (these could be humans or animals!) travelled around, met other groups and fought with them. But from these fights, they believe, a number of things arose, e.g. rivers, beaches, rocks, trees. These myths put fights into the past and make all kinds of useful things develop from them. Again, investigating Nigerian languages with regard to this topic would be important!

This reminds us somewhat of the Greek philosopher Heraclitus, who wrote that war is the father of all things, because new ideas, tools etc. are created by it. He wrote this in the fifth century before Christ. 50 years later, the historian Thucydides called war a „violent teacher“. These are opinions which after two world wars seem to be cynical. But Heraclitus’ sentence is not meant to favor war (instead of peace), but rather in the sense that from war many useful things for LIFE are generated, as modern philosophers tell us. But Heraclitus also wrote “pantarhei“ (everything flows), and this could be understood, from an ecological perspective, as ‘all living entities belong together‘; there is no ‘environment’, but a conenvironment which embraces all living beings: humans are not in the center, where they can use their so-called ‘environment’, but they are part of the animal/plant and human kingdom.

Mühlhäuser (2020) published an article titled “Quo vadis Ecolinguistics?”, in which he specifically discusses the future of Ecolinguistics. He gives a list of additional topics which have so far been excluded from ecolinguistic research; among these are (2020: 8)

- The negative effects of tourism, including eco-tourism
- Migration of human, plant and animal populations – their negative impact on endemic culture and natural kinds
- Ecological changes of all sorts brought about by digital technology
- Military expenditure and conflict.

Mühlhäuser writes (2020, p.8): “Detrimental ecological effects of traditional cultural practices such as fire ‘management’, equating cattle with wealth, holy cows, spread of pest-plants and animals by sea-farers, […] deforestation, […] destruction of megafauna, and many more; how can one reconcile cultural diversity with the well-being of Nature?” We see that Ecolinguistics has only started with a few topics so far. In the next few decades, ecolinguists will have a great deal to do, and Ecolinguistics will never die.
To me, one of the main topics is making people aware of the linguistic phenomena which contribute to creating conflict and war and investigating whether these (e.g. growthism) are also active in non-European (e.g. African) languages.

In this sense, it should be repeated that an awareness of certain linguistic phenomena (growthism, contrasts) would help to create and maintain peace – not because language is responsible for creating war, but because language mirrors thinking, and becoming aware of these mirrored phenomena would avoid war. This paper finishes with the last sentence of Halliday’s talk “New Ways of Meaning: The Challenge to Applied Linguistics” (2001, p.199). A few words have been added to it: Classism, growthism, destruction of species, pollution [and even war]– are not just problems for the biologists, physicists [and sociologists]. They are problems for the applied linguistic community as well. I do not suggest for one moment that we hold the key. But we ought to be able to write the instructions for its use.

REFERENCES


