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THE INTERTWINED HISTORIES OF ECOLINGUISTICS AND ECOLOGICAL APPROACHES OF LANGUAGE(S)

HISTORICAL AND THEORETICAL ASPECTS OF A RESEARCH PARADIGM

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This paper is a written version of the communication I gave at the Symposium on Ecolinguistics organized by Jorgen Chr. Bang and Anna Vibeke Lindo at the University of Southern Denmark, Odense, June 11-12, 2009. The aim of this communication was twofold. First, I was willing to share the results of my research on the ecological paradigm with people who had called themselves ecolinguists for the last twenty or thirty years and who had tried to establish an ecolinguistics theory. It was in a most convivial atmosphere that I was invited to explain the reasons why I undertook the work of doing the history of ecological approaches in linguistics, and to present the methodological particularities of my work which rest on the contemporariness of ecological trends and the use, incorporation of, and critical view on new technologies in doing so. I then presented some of the results of my research, including the multi-dimensional analysis of the so-called seminal article launched by linguist Einar Haugen in the 1970s (Haugen, 1971) which has been very instrumental in clarifying some of the contemporary ecological explorations of language and languages. I finally showed that these ecological trends are laying the foundations of a theoretical renewal in sociolinguistics and ethno/anthropological linguistics while arousing our interest for a thorough examination of biological background information in the study of linguistic evolution. Contemporary ecological frameworks based on empirical studies are thus regarded as epistemological and theoretical ushers in the areas of cognitive linguistics, sociolinguistics, linguistic typology, and Creole studies.

INTRODUCTION

I discovered the term *ecolinguistics* in 1999 in a book entitled *Endangered Languages* (Grenoble, 1998, p. 23-24)¹, when I was working on minority languages. Then again, on several occasions (especially when working on orality and literacy amongst Australian Aboriginal languages), I came across some ecological frameworks in linguistics under different names such as “the ecology of language”, “language ecology” or “ecolinguistics”, mostly in books and articles written in English. There were at least two things which started me thinking about doing the history of ecological approaches in linguistics.

The first thing was that strong supporting arguments in favour of an ecological approach in the study of language and languages instead of traditional ones were almost nowhere to be found at the end of the nineties. There are of course some reputable introductions and short histories of ecological approaches (ecolinguistics or others) such as the ones written by Alwin Fill (Fill A., 1993), Peter

¹ My research interests lie at the interface between theoretical and epistemological questions, more specifically between the descriptions made by ecological approaches (in linguistics, sociology, anthropology and enactivist and situated cognition), empirical (or experimental) studies and the development of new technologies. I also have a ten-year experience in teaching and I am currently a temporary researcher and assistant lecturer at the Université d'Angers (France) where I teach educational linguistics (linguistic analysis and linguistic theories applied to FLE, French as a foreign language), sociolinguistics, and French as a foreign language.

Mühlhäusler and Alwin Fill (Mühlhäusler P., 2001), Mark Garner (2004), or in a true historical perspective, the unequalled article by Martin Döring and Brigitte Nerlich (Döring M., 2005), but they are all mainly written from the inside (*i.e.* internal or oriented historiographies) and quickly move to specific developments. One of the most trying things is probably to read on and on the everlasting complaint about Saussurean structuralist theory of language which is said to exclude external parameters from the study of language, and to notice the lack of references from past and present linguistic theories also emphatically opposing representations of languages seen as closed-systems and which assess the complex nature of language. Such reductionist views therefore cannot lead linguists to plead the cause of ecolinguistics.

Secondly, and that explains the reason why my communication is entitled “the intertwined histories of ecolinguistics and the ecological approach of language”, despite methodological, theoretical and scientific discrepancies amongst multifarious ecological frameworks, one is often given to read that Haugen is the “Père fondateur” of the ecology of language. Have people read too much into what he wrote in 1971? Why has the seminal work failed to lead to a unified field of research (or research paradigm)? How can we explain or understand the circulation of names and proper names such as Einar Haugen—is it to give visibility, consistency or continuity to a hybrid approach? Doing the history of ecological approaches in linguistics thus consisted in digging into inner historiographies, questioning terms like seminal works, pioneer actors, continuity and paradigm, and trying to decipher the use of a term such as ecolinguistics by different actors and schools of thought, disclosing the difference often made or provided between ecolinguistics and the ecology of languages. As a matter of fact, such historical work had to prevent itself from yielding to a nominalist approach by going beyond “ecolinguistics”. It also aimed at finding out why until very recently the ecological trend was so unsuccessful in France. Even though things are changing now, there is still a long way to go. Nevertheless, similar approaches before Haugen’s had already been developed in France under the name of sociolinguistics (Encrevé P., 1967). Moreover, the approach was not unknown as some French linguists like J.-B. Marcellesi as early as the 1970’s (Marcellesi J.B., 1975), C. Hagège (1985) or L.-J. Calvet (1999), had tried to introduce the term ecolinguistics (or an ecological approach) in the landscape of French sociolinguistics, followed lately by the Institute of French Linguistics which has opened a session called “Sociolinguistics and ecology of languages”² or the CNRS linguistic laboratory LACITO who organized a workshop on the subject last October “Linguistic change and social ecology”³.

In 2002, there was nevertheless little overt support in the field of French sociolinguistics for ecological approaches be it ecolinguistics or ecological frameworks without a name. It was overlooked by linguists, and many of my colleagues did not see any interest in doing the history of a non-existent field of research. Besides, the word ecolinguistics was often attached to some marginal attempts at ecologizing language and/or mind—a linguistic theory warped by ideology and political claims. It was being ostracized for its dangerous eco-attitude too close to “deep ecology” or some other unprincipled strategies and biased forms of ecologist philosophies. But was it fair to cast ecological approaches all together without any insight into the ecological paradigm on the grounds that they were deviant forms of ecologist philosophies? The matter needs to be precisely demonstrated, and this is only possible by going back and forth between the present state of the paradigm, the disciplinary context, and the development of past argumentations. Probably the reasons why ecolinguistics and ecological trends disturb or threaten the community are because (i) there is of course a long and complicated relationship between biology and linguistics, more precisely with the Darwinist developments of the 19th century naturalistic linguistics and the controversial debates around the genetic tree, blind mutation metaphors and the like, a relation inextricably interwoven in the 20th century with that of the ecological paradigm in anthropology and ethnology—its drawbacks and benefits⁴; and (ii) because of

² <http://www.ilf.cnrs.fr/spip.php?article101>

³ <http://lacito.vjf.cnrs.fr/themes/TCL/changeecologie.htm>

⁴ From the middle of the 19th century to the first half of the 20th century, European language fields of research experienced a series of transformations and deep cleavages between schools of thought. Naturalistic linguistics was a thriving trend and the most authoritative one (see Schleicher’s and Müller’s dominant

the extensive relationship between ecology and the political arena. The 20th century has indeed witnessed major changes regarding the development of biological ecology which have led to the overlapping of public action and science. Thus, the ecological paradigm in disciplines others than biology is often compared to a dangerous tendency to submit science to our society's needs. This of course is to be linked to the neutrality/objectivity debate, and also perhaps to the question of "whose needs?". The kind of "awareness" that is taking place at the moment may indeed modify our ways of doing research but to what extent and in what directions, we do not predict.

1. THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

This paper presents some of the results of my research on the history of the ecological paradigm in linguistics (led from 2003 to 2008) (Lechevrel, forthcoming)⁵. I would much describe my work after Jean-Louis Fabiani as a "historical sociology of the organization of knowledge" (Boutier J., 2006). Two of the books I was first given to read by my supervisor were *The Genesis and Development of a Scientific Fact* by Ludwick Fleck (1935) and *The Cognitive Revolution in Psychology* by Baars (1986). Both books were rather influential in my thinking and I was much guided by Baars's conception of validation of scientific domains and his comparing the academic world itself to an ecological niche. Some other sociological works on the rise and fall of disciplines were also instrumental in my work at a theoretical level.

The specificity of my work has been on the one hand to work on "emergent disciplines/fields/trends/paradigms" using and questioning the use of new technologies in the history of science, and on the other hand, to focus on Haugen's contribution so as to situate his article into his lifework and disciplinary context. I hoped to establish a fair continuity of "The ecology of language" with contemporary trends, especially in the field of sociolinguistics. I gathered two corpora before starting working on Haugen's work in order to present a state of the art of both ecolinguistics and ecological approaches in a broader sense. I indicate in the subsequent sections the methodology that was taken on to do so.

1.1. Corpus 1: lexical items, choice of languages, the internet and integrated catalogues

As I was collecting and analyzing data on the subject, it turned out that the term *ecolinguistics* had taken on some very specific theoretical colours or was being stabilized into a discipline, a stability that the other ecological trends in linguistics did not share (such is the case for at least the ecological approaches developed in sociolinguistics, the sociology of language or language evolution studies—especially Creole studies). But despite this observation, all of these approaches kept pointing to the same seminal work by Einar Haugen. However, the reader is often left with very little to cling to in terms of theoretical and historical arguments as no real analysis of this supposedly seminal article is ever displayed.

I used the term ecolinguistics in my research, amongst other expressions, because it was a window to the world of these approaches, but I did not narrow down all approaches to the discipline ecolinguistics (*e.g.* defined by some actors as a "dialectical approach"). It allowed me to avoid the reification of disciplines and the objectification of individuals through their seminal works. Haugen

work). One of the first linguists to find himself in conflict with these naturalistic theories was certainly H. Schuchardt in the field of Creole studies (Schuchardt, H. (1922). *Hugo Schuchardt-Brevier. Ein Vademekum der Allgemeinen Sprachwissenschaft*. Spitzer Léo (éd). Halle: Max Niemeyer). As for the development of an eco-anthropology and ethnology in France, see the works by Haudricourt as early as the 1940s.

⁵ I defended my Ph.D. dissertation on 24 October 2008 (Thesis Supervisor: Professor Michel De Fornel). The defense took place at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales (EHESS, Paris), before the following defense committee: Prof. Pierre Encrevé (DE, EHESS); Prof. Michel de Fornel (DE, EHESS); Prof. Gabriel Bergounioux (Linguistics, Université d'Orléans); Dr. Dominique Guillo (Researcher, CNRS-GEMAS) and Prof. Salikoko Mufwene (Linguistics, University of Chicago).

himself wrote that “the name of the field is of little importance, but it seems to me that the term ‘ecology of language’ covers a broad range of interests within which linguists can cooperate significantly with all kinds of social scientists towards an understanding of the interaction of languages and their users” (Haugen E., 1971, p. 21). Without going any further into detail regarding nominalist philosophy, one is reminded that methodological awareness is necessary when doing the history of the ecological paradigm in linguistics, *i.e.* regarding the benefits and drawbacks of a nominalist approach to identify trends and/or delimit a field of research. Moreover, the root *eco-* has to be carefully defined and correlated to a refined study of the words that constitute the expression used to name all these different approaches and their hierarchical relationship at a lexical and syntactic level. The history of the term ‘sociolinguistics’ in France, its success and failures, was a great source of inspiration for that matter. The way libraries classify new disciplines was also of interest to me. For instance, the 2003 RAMEAU classification⁶ for the first time listed the term ecolinguistics under the category “Arts et lettres”, in the subdivision “geography”. This is of importance regarding the links between dialectology and sociolinguistics, and the possibility of continuity between contemporary trends and Haugen’s scientific background and environmental and historical context. In addition to this lexical analysis, there was also a translation problem and the question of an arbitrary choice of languages which limits the inquiry to only four European languages: English, French, German and Spanish.

Finally, I used recent studies on the virtual world and new technologies like those by La Vega (La Vega J.F., 2000) or more recently by Pierre Lévy, to analyze the visibility of ecological trends on the Internet. What I did consisted in showing that while browsing the web for information (on Google for example) could make people think they get a clear picture of a research field, and even get an insight into a sort of English-speaking world opposed to a French-speaking one, these worlds are actually to be questioned as the Internet is not an isomorphic picture of anything except what people want to see or find on the web; thus, it is not an isomorphic picture either of what “real” ecological approaches could be. I consequently opposed the Google world to the “deep web” (*i.e.* the invisible Web which comprises archives, database and libraries catalogues not covered by web browsers) by contrasting a simple internet search with a bibliometric search. This led me to a non-exhaustive bibliometric study of literature on/in ecological frameworks which lists the publications of 120 authors in the four languages mentioned above.

1.2. Corpus 2: definitions

The second corpus is made of available definitions of what ecolinguistics or an ecological approach could be, obtained either by oral testimonies or written texts found on the Internet or into the books from the database. Therefore, my work has consisted first in collecting as much data as possible on ecological works in linguistics, using the different existing keywords in circulation (see corpus 1: 120 items in the database, more than 500 peripheral bibliographical references and a complete bibliography of Haugen’s work) and second, in gathering definitions so as to render a clearer picture of the ecological paradigm in linguistics (see corpus 2: 12 definitions, including an analysis of the Wikipedia definition available on the Internet, analyzed from a sociological point of view).

⁶ Site RAMEAU : <http://rameau.bnf.fr/>. « RAMEAU (Répertoire d'autorité-matière encyclopédique et alphabétique unifié) est un langage d'indexation matière. Ce langage documentaire est utilisé, en France, par la Bibliothèque nationale de France, les bibliothèques universitaires, de nombreuses bibliothèques de lecture publique ou de recherche ainsi que plusieurs organismes privés. »

2. DISPLAYING SOME OF THE RESULTS

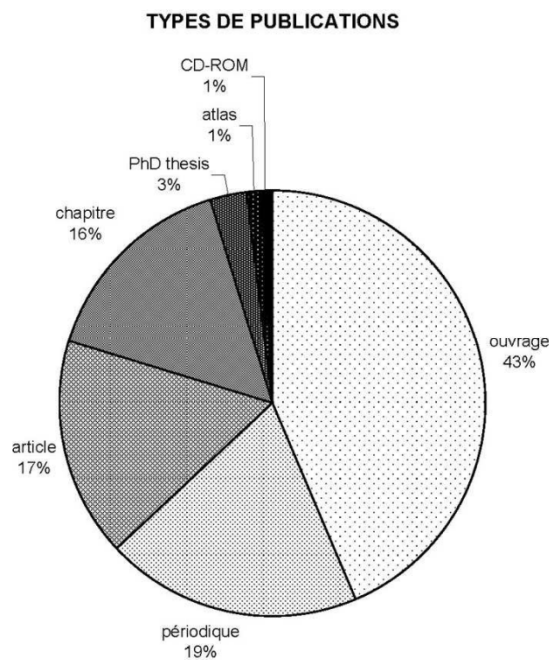
TABLE 1: “The different expressions used to refer to an ecological approach in linguistics and their translation”

Ecologie linguistique	linguistic ecology (inversion syntaxique*)
Linguistique écologique	ecological linguistics (inversion syntaxique*)
Ecologie du langage	the ecology of language, language ecology
Ecologie des langues	the ecology of languages
Ecolinguistique	ecolinguistics
*Les catégories grammaticales sont préservées lors de la traduction	

List of items (and their translation) used to constitute the corpus

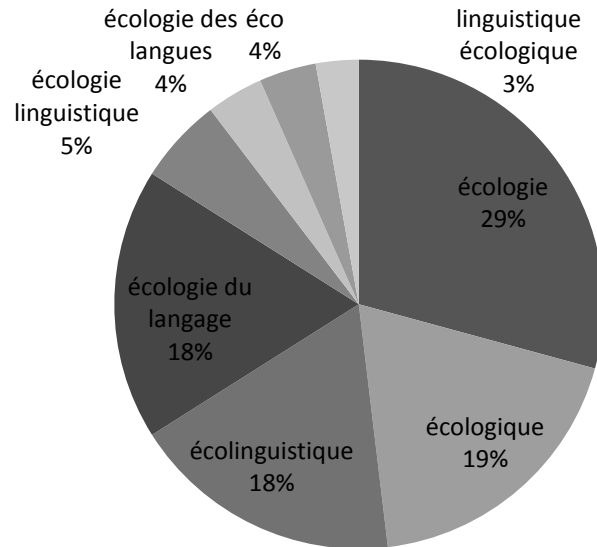
langues \ Terme Pivot	Ecologie des langues / Ecologie du langage	Linguistique écologique	Ecologie linguistique	Ecolinguistique	Ecologie de + terme théorique des sciences du langage (<i>nom commun et nom propre</i>)
Anglais	Ecology of language / language ecology	Ecological Linguistics	Linguistic Ecology	Ecolinguistics	Ecology of +
Allemand	Ökologie der Sprache / sprachökologie	Ökologische Linguistik	Linguistik Ökologie	Ökologistik	Ökologie der +
Espagnol	Ecologia de las lenguas	X	Ecologia linguística	Ecolinguística	Ecologia de +

TABLE 2: “Type of production”



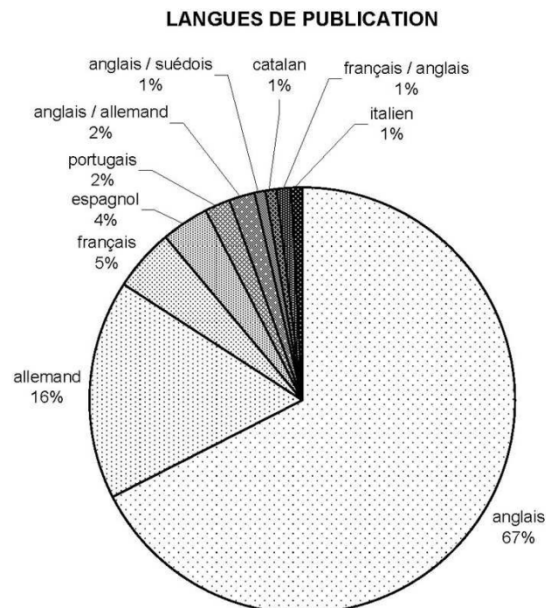
One could be led to think that the production finds itself in a process of stabilization, as it first appears that 43% of the production is contained in books, but 52% of the production is actually mainly to be found in short format (*i.e.* in book chapters, articles and reviews).

TABLE 3: “How often are these terms used?”



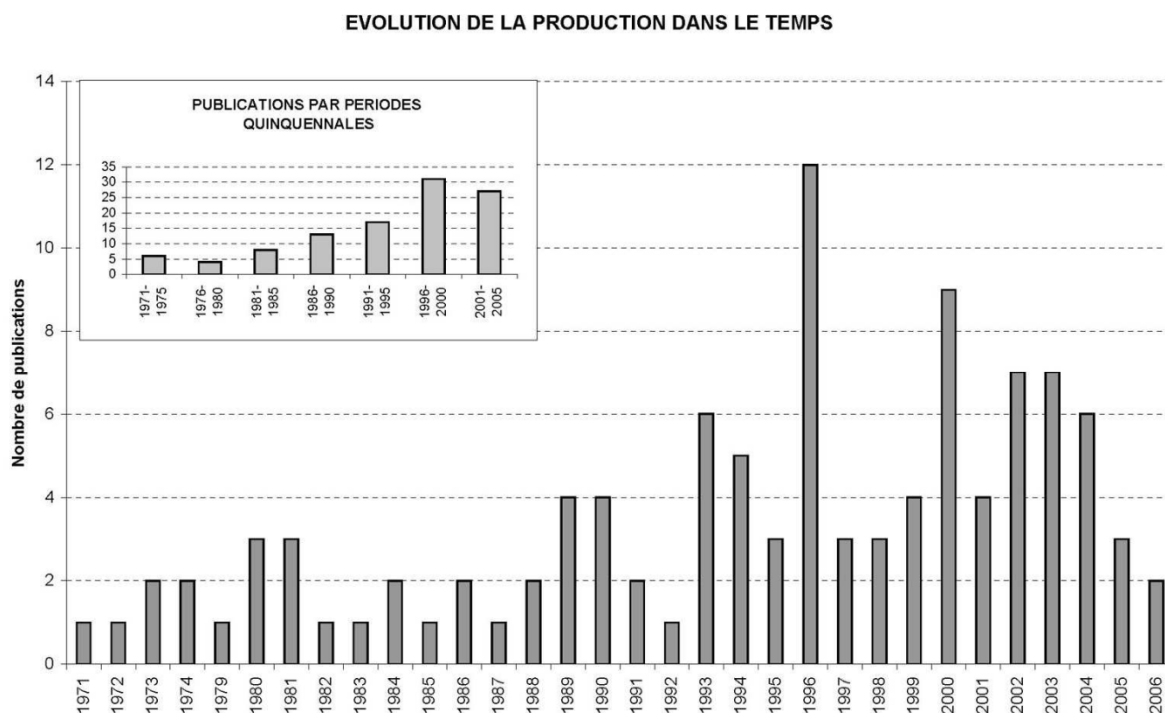
Again, this shows that the adjective and the name of the discipline from which the concepts are being borrowed are preferred to terms referring to a discipline.

TABLE 4: “Languages used in publications”



Where you can see the predominance of English but also the high rate of publications in the German language which is to be linked to the Austrian and German effort to turn an ecological (or dialectical) approach into a discipline called ‘ecolinguistics’.

TABLE 5: “Scientific production throughout time”



The above quantitative study starts with Haugen’s article entitled “The ecology of language”, first published in 1971. The five-year distribution shows a regular increase in production, with a rise in 1996 until 2000. The year 1996 was positively marked by a multiplication of publications (mostly in German), indicating an unequivocal gathering of people identifying themselves as ecolinguists into co-authored books. Two events can actually throw light on this recovery of an ecological approach in linguistics: the organization of important conferences like AILA’96, entitled “Language and Ecology. Eco- Linguistics. Problems, Theories and Methods” (Bang J.Ch., 1996); and the publication of *Sprachökologie und Ökolinquistik* (Fill A., 1996), the book which collected for the first time contributions by researchers committed to developing an ecolinguistic theory (e.g. J. Døør, J. Chr. Bang, P. Finke, W. Trampe, A. Makkaï, P. Mühlhäusler, A. Alexander). The publication of this book starts an upturn of the ecological approach in linguistics after Haugen’s article in new directions. The same year, P. Mühlhäusler wrote two books, the first one with Wurm and Tryon (Mühlhäusler and *alii*, 1996), and the second one on *Linguistic Ecology : Language Change and Linguistic Imperialism in the Pacific Region* (Mühlhäusler P., 1996). D. Harmon and D. Nettle delivered publications connecting the study of endangered languages to the analysis of biological diversity. Still the same year, and in a quite different approach, S.S. Mufwene offered an ecological treatment of Creole languages in an article entitled “The founder principle in Creole genesis” (Mufwene S.S., 1996).

Lastly, in December 2000 in Graz University was held the Austrian linguistics symposium, exceptionally devoted to ecolinguistics (« On 30 years of ecolinguistics »). The communications were then published in 2002 in *Colourful Green Ideas* (Fill A. and *alii*, 2002).

3. FROM HAUGEN'S SEMINAL WORK TO CURRENT TRENDS

Even though Haugen staunchly defended the ecology of language, he did not manage to argue persuasively in favour of it. His 'seminal' article is often criticized for its too many second-hand references and lack of refinement of an ecological approach. But Haugen had a very particular position in the history of American linguistics; he was able to offer a singular reflexive look on his field of research (by contributing personally to the historiographies of linguistics) due to his European and American double heritage. Moreover, he witnessed a very important period in the history of linguistics, *i.e.* the rise of the "Chomskyan revolution" and that of sociolinguistics and interdisciplinary approaches developed mainly by Hymes and Gumperz⁷. Working on Haugen's whole production has thus revealed to be very instrumental in doing the history of the ecological paradigm or ecological approaches in general in linguistics. The 1971 article has also made it clearer how Haugen's work (and Weinreich's) on language contact and bilingualism fostered the ecology of language (*i.e.* he wondered what was happening in people's minds in shift processes and how people interacted with each other and their environment).

Those interested in ecological approaches in linguistics may have noticed the countless cross-references made to Haugen's definition(s) of what the ecology of language should or could be. Yet, we do think that the most important elements of his article do not rest on these few sentences turned into dogmas, but on some more relevant comments. For instance, when Haugen implicitly refers to Humboldt by using Aristotle's notions of *ergon* and *energeia* only to say that languages of course are not either *a product* or *an activity* of humans, but both, and that language "appears as action, like all behaviour, but it exists in the mind as a potential, which can be treated as a thing, a thing that implies the possibility of action" (Haugen, 1971, p. 20); or when priority is given to the role of sociology, through references to human ecology and sociological works. Haugen's emphasis on human ecology stresses the importance of a more integrative linguistics and resonates with current trends in cognition, sociology or linguistics to move towards situated and enactivist anthropology, or ecological approaches.

Regarding the socio-historical context of the 1971 article, it is to be reminded that Haugen first presented it in 1970 as a communication for the CAL conference on understanding and archiving the languages of the world, and on language typology. Haugen's communication at that time gave an argument in favour of an ecological approach to language, but no theoretical framework. Nonetheless, it was already suggesting an integrative approach of language. The study of linguistic marks are quite relevant as well in the analysis of the evolution of the subsequent publications, there was for example a change in title between this conference ("On the ecology of languages") and the first publication in the *Linguistic Reporter* in 1971 ("The ecology of language"), and then again in the second publication in 1972 in Dil's book ("The ecology of language"). Several models can now be identified (after Haugen):

- Linguistic gravitational models in language planning and policies, language contact and languages in contact, and sociolinguistics (*e.g.* Calvet L.-J., 1999)
- Linguistic ecosystems and co-evolution in the sociology of language and diglossic contexts (see the complexity paradigm)
- Eco-critical discourse analysis in discourse analysis (or environmental linguistics)
- Dialectical linguistics in dialectical philosophy and linguistics (*e.g.* Bang J.Ch. and J. Door, 2007)

- Linguistic change and language evolution in Creole studies, linguistic typology and evolution (*e.g.* Mufwene S.S., 2001, 2008)

⁷ It's a well-known fact moreover that linguistics in America has developed out of an encounter with and an interest in the otherness of indigenous languages which explains its being somewhat of an anthropological linguistics since the beginning.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of our investigation was to analyze the emergence of ecological approaches in linguistics and to question the role of “The ecology of language” (Haugen E., 1971) in these developments. We showed that terms like ‘ecolinguistics’ or ‘ecological linguistics’ did not refer to a single well-defined theoretical model but rather to a vast body of research and propositions which nonetheless share a main line. Even though these trends, which are generally gathered under two or three umbrella terms, are linked one to another by rather loose (and somewhat superficial) connections, they enabled us to establish the fact that intellectual novelty (or scientific paradigms) is made possible through the development of models that are not always banded together to form a set theoretical framework. On the contrary, it does not prevent them from sharing some precise conceptual content. We hope the complexity of transferring biological terms and models into disciplines of the humanities was well-illustrated by this case study on ecological approaches and metaphorical ecological models in sociolinguistics. As for Haugen’s own receptions of the ecology of language (1979, 1987), they certainly legitimate at least two directions in the ecological paradigm: integrative and holistic approaches on the one hand, and the preservation of linguistic diversity (or endangered languages) on the other, while some other researchers have rather reinforced ecological borrowings by clearly establishing them in a well-defined theory of linguistic evolution (e.g. Mufwene S.S., 2008).

In many ways, Haugen’s ecology of language continues to articulate with nowadays ecological approaches grounded in sociolinguistics or the preservation of linguistic diversity, which are part of a general integrationist and interdisciplinary trend sometimes found under the expression ‘language, embodiment and cognition’⁸. This trend is for instance well illustrated through the contributions of various authors in a recently published book by Roslyn M. Frank and *alii.* on *Body, Language, and Mind*, whose second volume gives a better handle on understanding “Sociocultural situatedness”. In order to help our readers remember how integrative an ecological approach can be, we shall underline a fortuitous combination of words in the adjective ECOLOGICAL: evolution, cognition, ontology, language(s), observation, groups, individualities, culture, anthropology and linguistics; pretty much everything that is needed to carry out our empirical and theoretical inquiry on language.

⁸ To cite only a few names, see the works by M. Tomasello; N. Enfield; S. Levinson; W. Croft; V. Evans and S. Pourcel; Ch. Goodwin; W. Hanks, J.B. Haviland, E. Hutchins or A. Noë.

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