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Language, Cognition and Culture in Eco-Narratives

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Abstract: This paper represents the on-going project in ecolinguistics titled "ECOWord." The main objective of the project is to bring about suitable answers to the questions of human-nature relationships reflected in eco-related texts.

Keywords: ecolinguistics, cognitive semantics, conceptual metaphor, discourse, narrative

Introduction

The emergence of various ecological approaches in linguistics that developed since publication of Haugen's "The Ecology of Language" [5] generated several significant ways to study this interdisciplinary field. Because the language of ecology and specifically "the environment of language" open an infinite world of possibilities [11, 2], it is important to define how we approach language-environment constructs primarily from the linguistic point of view. Such an approach can be described nowadays more as juxtaposed and less as opposing. The on-going dynamics demonstrate that language can be both a tool in analysis of eco-related issues and be the object of ecological research. On the one hand, language conceptualizes as a "living organism" that influences the way we perceive the world and interact with it. On the other hand, language is shaped by the environment, in which it is functioning.

Eco-narrative is understood as a form of environmental writing, a text that passes ecological tenets through rhetorical, linguistic and cognitive strategies.

Discourses on literature and the environment, the dynamics of environmental perception and the interaction between humans and the world around them as a solution to the many problems of such relationships has been the main focus of ecolinguistics and ecocriticism. From this point of view, the current ecological crisis created environmental thinking and it is important to be fully aware of what kind of knowledge we have on this issue (do we need more), what power generates critical thinking, what are the desires and intentions of humans.

The ecological frameworks in linguistics use different terms for researching the relationships between the language of humans when describing the environment, such as "language ecology", "the ecology of language" or "ecolinguistics" but it is generally accepted that the worldview on the interaction between humans and the rest of life on earth has a dual nature: anthropocentric (*nature as machine*) and biocentric (*nature as mother*) [12, 1-3].

The biocentric worldview is a "set of beliefs, assumptions, biases or ideologies that place the biosphere at the centre of a person's life, thought and feeling" [12, 7]. The role of humans in the anthropocentric worldview as dominant over nature and seeing nature as no more than "an instrument for human ends" [12, 3] evokes the series of questions such as "What is the impact of humans on nature sustainability of the environment?" and "What can we do about it?"

Discussions related to cognitive assessment of the global environment and the impact of humans on nature and vice versa have brought an interesting insight to the topic of language and cognition. In the words of Hutchins (2010), it is now apparent that "cognitive science is shifting from viewing cognition as a logical process to seeing it as a biological phenomenon" [7, 705]. Although the ways and outcomes of the human-environment interaction are one of the most important topics in cognitive ecology and ecocriticism, understanding of the issue of language and psychology in this sense is lacking in depth. Further research in this application should meet this challenge.

Summarising all the above, it seems obvious that the key solutions on the topic should be found in an interdisciplinary approach. Only linguistic or strictly cultural approaches are not sufficient to research such complex constructs of human-nature relationships. Thus, I propose to focus on three main areas, each highlighting a particular sector of an interdisciplinary framework involving linguistics, cognitive psychology and cultural studies: (i) biosphere as expressed in eco-narratives of different cultures; (ii) metaphorical density (i.e., a number of coded conceptual metaphors per document) and diversity in conceptualization of ecology related issues in environmental writing; and (iii) psychological evaluation of eco-narratives in society in different cultures.

To attain these goals, the following questions should be prioritized: (i) How does the language system transport ecological ideas in eco-literature? (ii) How does language shape the environmental cognition of people in different cultures? and (iii) How images (e.g., visual perception of travel experience imagined or experienced) and words (e.g., metaphors, emphatic descriptive constructions) embody thoughts on human-nature interaction?

Both anthropocentric and biocentric worldviews are significant in this kind of analysis. However, to fully reveal the issues behind a “partnership model” [12, 7] between humans and nature in the age of global environmental crises, the anthropocentric view is considered as the more important with its various gradations.

Methodological Approach and Project Management

According to Howarth (1996), nature is known through images and words [6] and thus validity is found through data (i.e., “in words”) involving semiotic perspective of text (discourse analysis) as well as extra linguistic data, such as intentions or attitudes embedded in texts (textual attitude analysis) and thought construction tools as image-schema or conceptual metaphor (conceptual cross-domain mapping). Thus, the source material of such complex study should reflect its diversity. Consequently, the corpus of environmental writings is divided into three sections: (i) literature on nature, ecosystems; (ii) exploratory and adventure literature; and (iii) literature on climate change, population and global sustainability.

Apart from eco-narratives covering topics on nature and environment, specific attention is paid to travel writings. Starting from travel literature of ancient Greece (Pausanias, 2nd century CE) or the Song Dynasty of medieval China, this genre continued to tell the stories of the unknown via maritime diaries of writers like Richard Hakluyt or well-known explorers such as Captain James Cook. Both fictional literature in the form of essays and poems and guides of travel writers in the forms of diaries served as sources of information about unknown lands, inevitably including notes on nature and the environment. In spite of quite an impressive historical background, the study of travel literature of various kinds as an independent study started to gain power only in the mid-1990s [10]. Nowadays such literature is transformed into independent studies on environment and travelling involving, for example, nature literature and exploratory literature.

The methodological framework is two-fold: the grounded theory principles of qualitative data analysis [4] are employed in the cognitive linguistic part of the research using computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS). A software-based methodology for studying concepts, conceptual metaphors in discourse [8, 22-23] was already applied successfully to trace discourse dynamics [2]. The source material is analysed to disclose and interpret linguistic, cognitive and discursive functions of eco-related texts. It is possible to research all functions using CAQDAS because the structure and capacity of CAQDAS are designed for profound qualitative analyses like this project.

Psychological evaluation of eco-narratives in society of different cultures

Ecocriticism from the psychological perspective is a way of finding specifics of human psychology in the age of environmental crises. Unique folk psychology is created and expressed through narrative, when narrative construction of reality is strongly connected with social intelligence [1]. Environmental issues are relevant for the stylistic categories of fiction and non-fiction narrative because even fictionalized accounts of imaginary or historical events is a part of human interaction with the world. In the case of fiction narrative, ecological, social or other principles are “mapped” in the narrative and are informed by such to see how society might look under such principles.

More recently the emphasis has shifted towards psychological meaning construction [9], which has a direct relation to the expression of the way people organize their relationships with the world. Narrative organization and psychological organization are current topics to disclose the relationships of a speaker’s perspective and experience of text. Narrative composition here refers to psychological relationships (emotions, attitudes) between characters in the narrative. Originating from Peirce’s concept of unlimited semiosis (1931), Eco [3] developed an interesting insight on the role of a reader in the process of making meaning from texts, emphasising in his Theory of the Model Reader (1998) that a reader may actualize various meanings and contents to decode the narrative. For a reader to acquire awareness on various eco-related topics “encoded” in text, one needs to actualise the meaning-content of text. Here the notions developed by Eco – the empirical reader and the model reader – find their application to answer the question on the extent of general awareness and/or encyclopaedic knowledge on the subject.

Concluding remarks

What I expect to achieve is a profound analysis of eco-thematic texts in a variety of genres. The eco-related information embedded in the written language is something that can be used for better understanding of the way people conceptualize ecological reality and store it for future retrieval. This seems especially useful for educational purposes. Furthermore, conceptual coding of eco-related

information of the eastern and western writers will show contrast between cultural backgrounds on the topic.

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