

based on equal respect and active appreciation including every single language lies the key to a sustainable emerging global culture. The problems, issues and crises facing humanity today cannot be solved by notions of progress and proposed solutions coming from one language or even a few surviving major languages. The more windows to the world are closed, lost and forgotten, devalued or dismissed, dominated, exploited or abused, the more we will suffer from the constraints, the impoverished perception, the reduced expression, the repressed and oppressed potential, inevitably fixed and encoded in one exclusive and excluding linguistic access mode to the human experience.

To save languages and to work towards a global ethnolinguistic democracy is neither an impractical idealistic luxury nor a counter attack against English, but an essential, urgent and mandatory necessity for an adequate sustainable emerging global communication economy.

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## The Ecological Perspective: Benefits and Risks for Sociolinguistics and Language Policy and Planning

Albert Bastardas-Boada

### Abstract:

In recent years, the creative metaphorical use of the concept of *ecology* has made possible new approaches to the fields of sociolinguistics, language policy and language planning. Now we have to become aware of the potential dangers of an excessive reification of systems of linguistic communication, since there is always the risk of neglecting individuals when using this model and of forgetting the fact that these cultural 'species' are, in the final analysis, the product and function of the cognitive and communicative activity of human beings. The paper thus explores some theoretical, ethical and political differences between a bioecology and a linguoecology that we should bear in mind. We suggest the adoption of a perspective based on the theory of complexity as mainly developed by Edgar Morin, in order to build a socio-cognitive ecology centered on human beings, their products and their micro- and macro-social contexts, and not only on 'languages' – as species – and their environments.

### 1. Introduction

In recent years, in order to answer fundamental questions in the fields of sociolinguistics and language policy and planning, we have made metaphorical use of the conceptualization of the organization of biological phenomena into systems, known popularly as *ecology*. Of course, sociolinguistic objects are not fundamentally (or exclusively) biological; they belong to a different, emerging order of phenomena. Nonetheless the analogies we construct, the concepts we adopt, the questions we raise, and, above all, the paradigm we seek to produce – by considering languages as cultural 'species' living in a particular environment with their own ecosystems – are likely to be illuminating and suggestive.

We should of course be clear at all times that the model is metaphorical, and be aware of the potential dangers of a reification

of systems of linguistic communication. Though we place them in broader sociocultural contexts than those usually considered, there is always the risk of neglecting individuals inside the model and of forgetting the fact that these cultural 'species' are, in the final analysis, the product and function of the cognitive and communicative activity of human beings.

## 2. The ecological perspective: its fundamental contribution

At the *theoretical level* perhaps the greatest virtue of the ecological analogy for sociolinguistics and linguistic policy and planning, and for linguistics in general, is that it provides us with conceptual instruments that can give a more operative definition of what we habitually term the *context*. Applying the system-based approach of biological ecology (see Margalef 1991) enables us to think of linguistic forms and codes as elements that are by their very nature integrated in their sociocultural habitat. These forms and codes stand in relation to other objects in the ecosystem, such as individuals' ideas of reality, the social meanings attributed to forms and codes, the socioeconomic categorization of individuals, group representations, and so on. As Morin (1991) says, the ideal approach considers that linguistic forms live in society and in culture which, at the same time, live in linguistic forms. We are thus on the way to expressing the non-fragmentation of reality, the non-separation of elements and their contexts.

The ecological vision enables us to bring together elements which appear to be separate, while at the same time maintaining a degree of autonomy for each distinct part (see Capra 1996). So we can now leave behind us the image of linguistic codes as separate from the other components of reality, though this idea of separation has presided over most of the field of linguistics for many years. This perspective provides a much clearer understanding of language change and shift. Without any hesitation on theoretical grounds we can relate modifications of form to the decisions of speakers or to changes in their demolingistic, sociological or economic contexts. The 'life and death' of languages – to be metaphorical again – are much better understood from an

ecological perspective. The use or neglect of language varieties is the consequence of developments in other relevant sociopolitical aspects that comprise the sociocultural ecosystem as a whole: any change in ideologies, values, economic or political organization, waves of migration, technological innovations, etc., which disrupt stability of the ecosystem are likely to lead to respective changes in the forms and codes of linguistic communication between humans. Languages, then, like biological species, never live in a vacuum; they are fully integrated and adapted to their sociocultural ecosystem and to the other elements inside it. Substantial changes in certain key aspects of their habitat may signify their replacement or neglect, and so eventually their gradual extinction.

Certain precise conceptualizations of biological ecology are of great heuristic use to us, in particular with regard to our understanding of developmental phenomena. For example, the findings of the bioecologists that have preceded us will deepen our understanding of the contacts between different linguistic groups. The contact between two species, they tell us, is never purely binary. A third element is always present: the environment in which the contact takes place. The application of this perspective to the field of sociolinguistics is extraordinarily productive. In the contact between two linguistic groups, we should not focus solely on the groups involved but also, and indeed above all, on the broader context in which the contact takes place. As in biological species, the context may tend to favor one group over the other, and so the third element may have a decisive impact on the situation's development (see Bastardas 1993).

The ecological metaphor is extremely useful for our theoretical representations. It is also very valuable at the *ethical level*, that is, in our consideration of the responsibility of humans for their linguistic systems. In recent years public awareness of the danger of loss of biological diversity has risen dramatically; every day more and more people are lamenting the disappearance of animal and plant species. The crisis of biodiversity is a topical theme in the press and the media. Politicians and citizens' groups call for decisive action in favour of conservation. The crisis of linguistic diversity, however, is treated very differently. Linguistic groups all over the world are abandoning their ancestral languages, condemning them to gradual extinction. The spread of the nation-

states and the processes of industrialization and globalization have caused irreparable changes in the historical ecosystems in which these languages have subsisted and reproduced (see Junyent 1998 and Mühlhäusler 1996).

The ecological perspective – or perhaps more precisely the ‘ecologist’ perspective – is a useful focus for linguists who call for measures to reverse this trend of language shift and extinction. If we value *biological* diversity and strive to protect it, surely it is equally important to take moral responsibility for the conservation and development of *linguistic* diversity. Why sentence to death hundreds of languages and cultures which may contain the seeds of creativity and innovation for the whole of humanity? How can we ignore the suffering of minority groups forced to abandon the use of their own codes in order to survive?

Reversing this trend is a particularly difficult task. Our efforts have only just started. The resistance from economic and political powers may be strong. Only the creation of international, planet-wide organizations which are able to make themselves heard can help speakers of minority languages make the required changes in their environment. As they develop economically and culturally, they should also conserve their languages and cultures, and guard against a total, uncontrolled assimilation by the dominant languages and cultures in the contemporary world.

The task of harmonizing economic ‘development’, international communication, and maintenance of languages is one of the great theoretical and practical challenges of the *political level* today. If we do so in terms of ecological intervention, what should our political commitment aim to achieve? Is the solution to turn back the clock and return to a traditional sociocultural organization with its limited technical and economic resources? Probably not, because once individuals have experienced the benefits of ‘Western’ technology and civilization they will neither want, nor be able, to give up its perceived advantages. How then can we ensure that the adoption of new economic, political, mediatic and ideological organizations does not lead to the extinction of the planet’s linguistic diversity? (see Bastardas 1997)

Biological ecology has interesting things to say on this. In many cases it is impossible to reconstruct a particular species’ traditional habitat which would allow its ‘natural’ conservation and

reproduction. The changes to environments, in most cases brought about by human activity, are often irreversible. So what can be done? Attempts to recreate ecological systems must accept the fundamental problem that many old systems have lost their context. Without the right environment, the organization that maintained the species breaks down; the species enter a spiral of degradation and decline. So the main principle of restorative management in biological ecology is this: *the most effective management strategy is to recognize how the context has failed, to identify the services the context would have offered, and to provide support for the unit we aim to maintain and/or recover, so as to recreate as far as possible its earlier natural context* (see Allen & Hoekstra 1992).

Applied ecologists are also clear that this intervention is not an attempt to return the system to its original state, but rather to establish a “sustainable” situation. This sustainability is only possible if the intervention draws on the underlying processes of the system, incorporating them rather than working against them. The ideal, then, is an intervention that does not force the system to act in a highly prescribed way. It should use processes that arise spontaneously, encouraging their development rather than opposing or fighting it.

Applied ecology clearly accepts the need for an ecosystem-based approach that takes into consideration the ecological, economic and sociopolitical systems that coexist in a particular situation. The solutions it proposes require coordinated action at all these levels, i.e. on the context as a whole, and not only in the strictly biological sphere, so as to create a dynamic of normal maintenance and spontaneous development. The key idea is, again, the role of the context, and the need to alleviate and compensate for its loss.

The value of these ideas in the area of language is enormous, in spite of the difficulty of applying them in the situations of linguistic discrimination in which many human groups find themselves. As we have said, the crisis of language diversity is the result of the destruction of ecosystem-based contexts which over centuries allowed this development. It is this breaking down of the socio-politico-economic habitats of human groups that oblige

many to change their traditional linguistic behaviour in an attempt to adapt – and to ensure that their children adapt – to new contexts.

A context-based approach is the key to intervention strategies for the preservation of linguistic diversity. But, as in the case of biological ecosystems, the intervention should be based not so much on measures focused on language itself, as on aiding the creation of new contexts which adapt to the new situations generated, and give their speakers reasons and functions for continuing to use their own linguistic varieties.

How does the historical context lack in the case of those language groups that have become minorities because of their politicoeconomic subordination? The first important fact is that these minority groups do not seem to see intergenerational transmission of the language of the parents and ancestors as 'normal' and desirable. What is there in the new context that causes parents to renounce transmitting their first language – their language of normal use – to their children? If parents whose first language is X decide to transmit Y as the L1 to their children it is probably because they consider that Y is more useful than X in their particular context. Again, the context is central. How do we account for this parental behaviour? Very probably the environment will have changed – the traditional local economy will have been replaced by modern technological methods, very often in the hands of outsiders and within a political framework of subordination – which leads to the neglect of X and the adoption of Y. In this situation, Y is seen as more necessary, better adapted to the future. Reciprocally, X is seen as old-fashioned; it is devalued, dispensable.

Clearly in this case the ideal solution is to intervene at the politicoeconomic level, persuading the group that their code will still be valid in the future and that it can be used legitimately and habitually in the immediate present. It is because of this security that the linguistic majority groups do not think about the language they should transmit to their children, even though the children may later need to learn many other languages. The intervention at political level is fundamental to the recovery and/or maintenance of the linguistic group, and economic intervention is essential to ensuring that the group has a sufficient degree of economic control.

If for whatever reason this general contextual change cannot be made, the intervention should aim to bring about at least a sustainable situation in which the image and the value of linguistic varieties are perceived as positive, and in which these varieties have important, prestigious public functions – in addition, of course to their informal interpersonal functions. One possible strategy for less ideal situations grants exclusive functions to the code that is losing ground. Although it may not be possible to recreate a context in which the group communicates totally in the autochthonous language, the exclusive attribution of a solid nucleus of public functions may reestablish the language as useful and necessary and, as far as the parents are concerned, worthy of intergenerational transmission. So, though the group may not have a complete range of functions for its own code, the code has certain uses that are widely accepted; this in itself makes a language a functional, useful one, and makes it necessary for the present and the future, thus ensuring the sustainability of a balanced situation.

### 3. Limits of the analogy

We have seen how the use of the metaphor of ecology outside its normal sphere of application – in biology – can be suggestive and creative for sociolinguistics in general and for linguistic policy and planning in particular. However, as is the case with all metaphors and analogies, we must be careful not to overstate the similarities of processes and elements which may initially appear to be comparable but may in fact correspond to rather different dynamics.

So, in identifying *theoretical* correspondences between biological and linguistic/cultural ecology, we must first of all establish the levels at which the two spheres operate. Biological ecology looks at the level of natural organisms, and linguistic/cultural ecology at a different level of phenomena which emerge in a subset of these organisms and their sociocultural organization. Biological ecology deals with animal and plant organisms with, at the most, very low levels of self-awareness and awareness of their interrelation with 'material' elements of the ecosystem; linguistic/cultural ecology deals with human beings,

their behaviours, cognitions and emotions, and their demographic, political, economic, sociocultural, ideological, linguistic and mediatic contexts. However many analogies we find, or comparisons we draw, we should be aware of the substantial differences between these two ecologies, and of the danger of making inadequate and counterproductive theorizations.

One of the fundamental differences at the level of the conception of objects is the fact that human beings possess *minds*. Even though many aspects of their material contexts are already determined, the mental possibilities of humans mean that they are more creative in their relations with their environments. Unlike beings with lower levels of awareness and intelligence, they are in a position, for example, to challenge the pressures of the context and to try to adapt it to their own ends. Thus, in the case of humans, the level of determinism is lower, and the actors involved in sociocultural processes are able to influence and redirect them.

Our approach therefore cannot be purely 'context-based' – as in the case of animal species without minds – but must also consider the level of social representations, narratives, and practices, and the values that inform our experiences. An excessively bioecological perspective may lead to misconceptions; this is the case with certain proposals from the domain of sociology that ignore the mind and present people more as externally determined automata than as individuals able to think and to transform their environment. So we need to construct a sociocognitive and historical ecology which considers contextual influences, seeing them in dynamic terms and bearing in mind as well the mental possibilities of the subjects, with all that this implies (see Bastardas 1996 and 1999). From this point of view, the work of Edgar Morin is fundamental, since he seeks, via an ecologization of thought, to construct a perspective of complexity which is able to integrate individuals and their contexts, the micro and the macro, and the historical dynamics in which events take place (see 1990 and 1991).

The existence of the mental capacity in humans makes the processes in which they intervene more complex than those involving less evolved organisms. The categorizations of reality, emotions and feelings, the organization of social relations, the historical narratives of the endgroup, the stages in the processes

of cognitive developments, value systems, and attitudes to existence all influence each other mutually inside a sociocultural ecosystem of which as yet we know little.

From the *ethical* point of view the possibility of intervening in sociolinguistic processes is also complex. Taking action to try to save a species from extinction does not have the same implications as trying to keep a language alive or to recover it. In attempts to save species the explicit desires of the participants are not an issue (it is taken for granted that they are in favour of it) but in attempts to defend a language it would be amoral and anomalous to ignore the wishes of the people affected. However justified conservationist linguists may feel, we cannot oblige a human group to maintain particular linguistic behaviours without their voluntary, active participation, still less against their will. Sociolinguistic ethics takes as its starting point the equality of all languages, and aspires to preserve the linguistic diversity that our species has created; it cannot ignore the need for acceptance and adherence on the part of the social actors in meeting these objectives. We cannot create artificial linguistic 'reserves', even though this might allow the maintenance of a specific linguistic variety. Ecolinguistic ethics must always bear in mind the people involved and their autonomy; it is they who must be its centre and its fundamental reason for existing.

This ethical dimension obviously introduces important differences at the *political level* between applied bioecology on the one hand and applied socioecology or ecolinguistics on the other. The intervention measures must be democratic and be implemented at all times with due respect for dissenting voices. Achieving the social consensus necessary among the people affected is not always easy. Typically, minority linguistic groups are faced with the dilemma of utility and identity, in which the choice they must make is either to abandon their language and adopt the dominant language, or to ignore the dominant language and maintain the collective identity even though this may not be an economically advantageous view. Obviously, bioecological interventions do not face these difficulties; it is enough to construct a natural habitat adapted to the requirements of the species. The species adapts deterministically if the conditions are suited to its survival and continuity.

In comparison with animal species, humans may find it particularly hard to adapt to contexts devised to preserve linguistic continuity. Even though political and other measures may well be fully accepted by the population, they may not have the desired effects on the society as a whole. The fact that sociocultural behaviours are less environmentally determined than genetic mechanisms may mean that the (re)constructed context is unable to preserve the language; the preservation of the material existence of an organism presents fewer problems. For biological species, a microcontext providing sufficient nutrients for its existence and reproduction may be enough, but in the case of small linguistic groups it is less likely that they will be able to construct totally suitable microhabitats, if the level of contact and interrelation with the other dominant group(s) is continuous in everyday life. Linguistic 'species' and sociocultural 'organisms' are, then, of a different nature and in all probability, require a theorization and a conceptualization that are different from those applicable in the biologic domain, even though biology is a suggestive analogy.

In fact, effective intervention is much more difficult in the case of humans. For example, a majority human group may react positively to the adoption of policies to preserve endangered animal or plant species, but the same group may not feel so well disposed towards preserving linguistic diversity in particular regions of a state in which it is dominant. As well as having a lower ethical awareness of the idea of linguistic preservation, their ideologies and interests may promote not linguistic difference but the assimilation of territorial groups into a homogeneous unit. In the case of language, we may thus find that the majority groups are unwilling to help minority groups to preserve their language. In this situation, interventions in favour of the creation of contexts of cultural continuity may be impracticable in spite of the active requests of the minority group, which, without control over its own social environment, may find itself condemned to a slow but irreversible extinction as a specific linguistic group. In these conditions, at a planetary scale, saving linguistic diversity may well turn out to be a more difficult task than saving biodiversity.

#### 4. Conclusion

We have seen how the ecological metaphor can be productive and inspiring for sociolinguistic approaches and for linguistic policy and planning. In fact, with the complexity and hologramatic (Morin, Bohm, Capra) perspectives, the 'ecological' vision of sociolinguistic facts and processes is no longer a simple analogy, but becomes a global, dynamic, inter- and transdisciplinary approach to reality.

Given this dynamic nature of reality, sociolinguistics and linguistic policy and planning fields should no longer be seen as a static field but a processual, evolutive phenomenon, in which global measures of intervention and the self-organizing evolutive dynamics of human societies influence each other mutually and seek new equilibria. Nor can linguistic policy and planning forget the psycho-socio-cultural order, assuming that it will readapt automatically and immediately to the changes caused by the interventions in the sociopolitical order.

Developing this approach further to understand and explain sociocultural phenomena and among them sociolinguistic developments and evolutions will allow us to promote more ethical principles in the field of linguistic diversity, and, as well, to propose interventions of all kinds – political, economic, ideological – that can contribute more effectively and extensively to the preservation and development of the linguistic and cultural richness of the human species.

In an era of planetary solidarity, it is our duty to promote worldwide organizations that take responsibility for the maintenance of diversity, promote the understanding of its value, and ensure that smaller linguistic groups in positions of weakness should benefit from favourable sociopolitical ecosystems, upholding universal cooperation and brotherhood at all times. A socio-cognitive complexity ecology then should be our starting point for the construction of a new reality – as Edgar Morin desired: "Il nous faut donc affronter les deux injonctions contradictoires: sauver l'extraordinaire diversité culturelle qu'a créé la diaspora de l'humanité et, en même temps, nourrir une culture planétaire commune à tous" (1993:97).

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## Ökologische Linguistik und Humanökologie

Wilhelm Trampe

## Abstract:

Thirty years ago, Einar Haugen, founder of language ecology, criticised the fact that most writers in the field of human ecology failed to consider language as an elementary part of the environment. This situation has not changed over the last thirty years. After looking at some of the reasons for this blind spot within human ecology, I will demonstrate that it is not only possible but also necessary to complement the 'paradigm' of human ecology with an ecolinguistic perspective. The ecology of language has to be understood as a central element of a general ecology of humankind. It will be shown that an ecolinguistic perspective on inquiries concerning the reason for the ecological crisis and an environmental awareness (for example in agriculture) will lead to new theoretical ideas and alternative evaluations of numerous empirical investigations. It is suggested that a 'linguistic turn' within human ecology through ecological linguistics will trigger new approaches to the ecology of humans in general.

## 1. Vorbemerkung

Beide Disziplinen – ökologische Linguistik und Humanökologie – blicken auf einige Jahrzehnte Forschung zurück: die ökologische Linguistik auf etwa drei Jahrzehnte, die Humanökologie auf circa acht Jahrzehnte. Allerdings ist ein wechselseitiger Austausch bislang nicht erfolgt. Dieser Umstand ist nicht nur aufgrund der thematischen Nähe beider Disziplinen bemerkenswert, sondern auch weil 'das humanökologische Paradigma' – wenn man diese Bezeichnung zur Zusammenfassung der methodisch, konzeptionell und begrifflich heterogenen humanökologischen Ansätze verwenden will – grundsätzlich interdisziplinär ausgerichtet ist. Und diese interdisziplinäre Orientierung gilt sicherlich auch für die wissenschaftstheoretische Perspektive einer ökologischen Linguistik. Dem Thema "30 Jahre Sprache und Ökologie – Errungenschaften und Visionen" entsprechend, sollen die Sichtweisen und Merkmale der Humanökologie und der ökologischen Linguistik im Hinblick auf eine gemeinsame Vision hin betrachtet werden, die darin be-