

Framing Discourse on the Environment

A Critical Discourse Approach

Richard J. Alexander

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1 Introduction

1 CONCERN WITH THE ENVIRONMENT

Life will probably continue on earth for some millennia. But it is becoming increasingly unlikely that human life will continue for quite so long, given the consequences of ever-rising quantities of man-made CO₂ emissions, among other things.

The current 'preoccupation' with talking about 'global warming' (Stern 2007) appears to have foregrounded an ecological issue at least for a brief span of media attention. The 'startling' pictures of melting icebergs and shrinking glaciers in Africa, Europe and Asia have apparently 'jolted' certain constituencies in the media, government and activist circles into a more serious and urgent consideration of the potential impacts of global warming on the state of humanity. Or perhaps, after all, one might view this as 'simply' one further, more irregular, swing of the pendulum of 'concern for the environment' that periodically has entered public discourse only to be subsequently suppressed. Examples would be Rachel Carson's (1962) pinpointing of the destructive effects of agriculturally applied DDT on bird-life (in the 1950s) and intensified agriculture generally or the consequences of the US Air Force (USAF) dioxin spraying ('Agent Orange') of the forests of Vietnam (in the 1960s). As we know, the effects and spread of such awareness are both narrow and short-lived; while individual historians and the directly affected survivors can retrieve such events and their significance for the biosphere from their personal files, it seems as if a Western memory hole is being maintained which prevents a sense of the past-in-the-present developing. Hence the reports of environmental and ecological disasters, like oil spills at sea or 'famines' linked with desertification processes in Africa, come and go cyclically like the stock market's ups and downs. And clearly, in the world of corporate globalisation, the pronounced priorities of the latter discount the relevance of the former (other than as sensationalized attention-grabbers) in the globally mediatized frame that constitutes the window on the world that is making the running and helping to run the world.

Even severe floods and abnormal storms in Northern and Central Europe are filed away, while the plans for additional runways and new giant airports

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are rubber-stamped by governments whose allegiances appear more closely aligned with hard-nosed business interests than with apprehension at the increasing propensity for asthma attacks among the children of their electors or constituents (citizens).

Perhaps the appreciation of the sheer complexity of the ways humans interact with and affect the biosphere, upon which they depend for their very existence, cannot be rendered verbally into comprehensible propositions. Maybe it is asking too much to expect people to grasp how the short-term activities they and their forefathers engage (or have engaged) in contribute to long-run and unintended consequences for the globe as a whole. As the Keynesian adage consolingly and individualistically notes: 'in the long-run we are all dead'. But not, of course, all at the same time, he might have added.

That perhaps is the crux of the issue. It seems to be 'just' talk. As long as certain families, tribes, groups, nations of people continue to survive and even to 'prosper', ecological and environmental issues somehow get relegated to the background. Why is this case? Where does anyone's interest in the way people talk or do not talk about the environment originate?

2 EXISTENTIAL AND INTELLECTUAL BACKGROUND

And what could all this concern with ecological issues have to do with language-oriented scholars, we might ask? The answer I attempt to give in this book can perhaps benefit from some biographical background. There are two strands worth briefly disentangling. The first is experiential or, shall we say, existential. The second, as we shall see, is clearly hard to separate from the first. But the spotlight is here on an academic or, perhaps more accurately, an intellectual position which has come over time to shape my professional (and personal) life. Both strands are criss-crossed by, and hard to divorce from, broader societal developments in politics, science and the mass media in the late 20th and early 21st centuries.

Let us start with the fundamentally existential position and how it impinges on language behaviour. Firstly, take the ambiguous term 'environment'. This can be contrasted with 'physical reality'. Human life as part of the broader biosphere, but as one mere element within it, presupposes the constant interaction of human beings with, and as an inseparable part of, their environment (Lakoff 1987: 215). So 'environment' is defined as relative to how human beings interact with 'physical reality'. The former is an anthropocentric notion, while the latter is independent of all animate beings. 'Physical reality', 'ecology', 'biosphere', 'environment', just to list such terms is to underline the difficulty of grasping the location of human existence at the level of individual words or concepts. It is hence perhaps no surprise to see the issue of relating to 'climate change' as humans as being, at least partially, a linguistic or discourse predicament.

Situating the predicament historically can help. There is a socio-political context which has influenced many of us in our everyday lives. The deterioration of the quality of life in the 20th century in post-war Europe is part of the context for ecological foregrounding to develop. Once there was smog and moreover deadly fog in London. Along came acid rain, killing forests in Scandinavia and elsewhere. Chernobyl blew up in 1986. So pollution, nuclear power, as well as nuclear bombs generally disconcerted large numbers of people. 'Something needs to be done' was the watchword of the 1970s and 1980s. The flowering of activist pressure groups, like Greenpeace, was one response in Western countries. Another was the growth of Green political parties in several European countries, sometimes with overlaps between the two.

As linguists and language scholars, many of us hold that language plays a major role in predisposing speakers to perceive or to construct the world in a specific fashion. And certainly, the notion that linguistic processes somehow influence how humans view the world, both natural and social, is hard to completely withstand. The links between language and society clearly exist and have an effect on 'worldviews'. But we need to be cautious here. As some writers argue, the perceptions or non-perceptions of ecological crises or of environmental problems, such as global warming or the destruction of the ozone layer, are not sensorially experienced. It is the many-voiced discourse of scientists that is the source of our knowledge of such issues. These voices are filtered and very often distorted by the media presentations of such happenings. The failure to make explicit 'where people are coming from', that is to say, what real interests underlie writings in both scientific and journalistic genres, as well as in business and politics, is an additional complicating factor in the discourse about environmental issues. There is furthermore the widespread post-modernist 'divertissement' that is to be encountered in much intellectual and scholarly life today. I am referring, of course, to the view that all is a question of discourse: 'the real world is simply a discourse construct'. This has to be a bad joke and clearly an untenable position in view of the suffering millions of people continue to experience in our real world.

In academic circles the influence of Foucauldian and other socially grounded discourse notions (see Fairclough 1992) is informing the debate about the relation between discourse, language and ecology. It is increasingly accepted that representations of the 'natural' world are socially constructed: that all representations and presentations of 'facts' involve 'evaluation'.

Also we can adduce work coming from critical media analysts to show how such 'manufactured' manifestations of the socio-political world abound in our contemporary mass media. Critical media analyses, as the investigation of reporting on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict by Philo and Berry (2004) exhaustively demonstrates, can bring out the ways in which the powerful and their media mouthpieces withhold the 'truth' and distort the facts (see Edwards and Cromwell 2006). It is at this point that linguists

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as intellectuals can usefully remember what Chomsky said (1966: 257): “It is the responsibility of intellectuals to speak the truth and to expose lies.” So, if as linguists we find language use and discourse implicated as a tool of misrepresentation of the situation, as thinking and acting and speaking beings, it is our duty to intervene.

The real world is the domain in which we live. And there is (or was) a tendency—let us call it the ostrich-tendency, for the sake of argument—to claim that the academic world is not part of this. It is fair to say that since the Chernobyl explosion (1986) (and not 2001, as some amnesiacs claim) this is a fiction which we can no longer afford to pursue—even if we ever adhered to it! We are not just academics. So how do these two worlds interact? In my own case, the existential and the intellectual planes have coalesced and this book is one of the results of and responses to that process.

The upshot of this ‘cascade’ of different perspectives and influences on ecological issues means a significant focus of language oriented activities will entail moving beyond what might be conceived as narrow subject boundaries. It is certainly my contention that an interdisciplinary approach is the only way language studies and actions which involve ecology and environmental issues can hope to proceed fruitfully in the future. Understanding of the way language and the investigation of ecology (indeed of science and technological applications in general) are linked requires an interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary approach (see Genske 2006 in this context). Demonstrating the link between language or discourse and the comprehension of ecological issues is a central area for interdisciplinary research to focus on. The need to factor in the social and the political ramifications is likewise paramount. Such an approach is not new for linguists and certainly not for applied linguists. They have long been aware of the need for this orientation. As Halliday says of linguistic analysis:

Any study of language involves some attention to other disciplines; one cannot draw a boundary round the subject and insulate it from others. (Halliday 1978: 11)

Once we realize that ecological issues are social and political problems, we see it is an exemplary area for interdisciplinary research, in fact. Let me mention the work of Michael Halliday again at this point. He refers to a linguist colleague, Adam Makkai, who “was among the first to think” in ecological terms and goes on to describe his own work: “I was (one could say, perhaps in complementary fashion) trying to adopt a linguistic perspective on the environment” (personal communication). Certainly, Makkai’s (1973) work impressed many of us already several decades ago, in its broad ecological sweep. So a call to show how language and thinking about the environment and ecology interact appears to have been a logical development from within certain linguistic circles for many of us. As we then saw, the important keynote speech Halliday (1990) gave at the AILA (International

Association of Applied Linguistics) conference in Greece served as a catalyst for more linguists, who positioned themselves as concerned intellectuals. Together with Halliday, many academics and scholars see this engagement in an area where language and nature come together as proceeding from a specific value stance, although there are a multitude of opinions as to what critical position we need to take up, some of which are discussed in this book.

Furthermore, we should not underestimate the extent and the power of the forces of repression at work in the world. Since the end of the Cold War and the victory of capitalism, it has become fashionable in certain circles to talk of a New World Order and an end to oppression and violence. The role the West plays, however, in earning money from producing military weapons of destruction (mass and otherwise) and selling them to regimes to suppress their minorities or just the political opponents in their countries (whether in Turkey or Indonesia in East Timor) defies credibility. See Chomsky (1994a) for more discussion about this state of affairs.

In view of the way the world is ordered, it is evident that the underlying inequality of access to information about the world—ecology or the environment, in our case—is overlaid by a façade which occasionally represents what goes on in the world as ‘natural’, as ‘harmless’ or even as ‘inevitable’. It is the dismantling of the language aspects of this façade which I see as the major objective of critical discourse analysis and also one of the major arenas of intervention for students of discourse and ecology. Numerous issues need to be foregrounded in this area. For example, we must stress how ‘talk’ or discourse is required to appreciate what is happening to the environment. We need to underline how physical seeing alone is inadequate in an industrialized world. This position also necessarily entails looking at what ‘science’ has to say about environmental issues. And far from being part of the solution to ecological questions, ‘science’ may well in its 20th and 21st century forms—especially in its linguistic manifestation, in its propensity to ‘construe reality’—since Newton onwards, turn out to be an intrinsic part of the problem.

So the dialectics of the Enlightenment force us to question and make clear not only the value stances we take up but also the very scientific methods we employ. Nowhere is this perhaps more obvious than in the treatment and analysis of the environment. We are part of and affect the very object we study. Science and technology go hand in hand. There is no separation possible between subject and object. These are not particularly new ideas of course. But we do well to repeat them in this context, I believe. The socially constructed nature of science is widely accepted by critical and concerned scientists today. When it comes to finding out what the cause of global warming and climate change might be and what actions might be taken to slow it down, we are not faced by a purely ‘scientific’ matter (Jasanoff 1987). As Ravetz (2006: 77) pointedly notes: “we live in a new age of policy where science is necessary but not sufficient for solutions.” The question is, how