Shaping self: Ecolinguistic studies of identity

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Introduction
By Valentina Boschian Bailo

Human beings can assume manifold identities and establish very different relationships based on such identities. These relationships may either foster equality, wellbeing and fairness for all participants involved, or they may subtly establish hierarchical positionings which create inequality and the dominance of some over others. This collection of short papers is the result of studies in ecolinguistics and was written by post-graduate students of the University of Udine (Italy). They were inspired by the book Ecolinguistics: Language, Ecology and the Stories We Live by (Stibbe, 2015) and its ecosophy. In their texts, the authors of this collection critically assess narratives which are pervasive in our everyday lives. More specifically, they explore the issue of (un-)ecological identities by drawing upon present-day examples of our industrialised and unsustainable lifestyle. In their papers, they address discourses which, more or less explicitly, reveal themselves as problematic for nature and humankind. They analyse a variety of text-types, from newspaper articles to advertisements and social campaigns, and address un-ecological stories starting from the identity attributed to the implied readers of these texts. The aim of this ecolinguistic mosaic is to investigate
the stories that shape our environment and the identities represented through those stories. Most of all, this mosaic paper is a call for awareness for people to become positive actors within and for the natural environment.

This mosaic paper presents examples of ecological and/or un-ecological identities, among which we find representations of identities grounded in consumeristic and neoliberal ideologies which try to convince people of the intrinsic value of purchasing products; identities based on unequal power relationships among people and between people and the environment; anthropocentric relationships towards other species; identities related to environmental technology as a tool for taking care of the climate crisis; and politically-committed identities against un-ecological energy policies.

The collective paper sheds light on how contrasting stories about our identities coexist, clash, and sometimes merge into clusters of controversial representations. Each author has provided a personal, critical analysis of a short text of their choice and the six papers compose a mosaic of the environmental aspects of our identities. This complexity manifests itself as part of the move towards more sustainable lifestyles that is taking place in our societies. The authors aim to offer a positive outcome for the critical issue they discuss, by sensitising people towards ecologically sustainable lifestyles and promoting engagement with environmental ideologies. In this respect, special attention is given to the representations of ourselves and the others that attach intrinsic value to everybody’s lives, wellbeing, and happiness.

This collection is a reminder of the power that people have to oppose harmful stories, reshape problematic ones, and create new stories which fit renewed ecological narratives about us as individuals and us as a collective.

References that inspired the mosaic paper


“Stop One. Stop Them All”: A powerful provocation from the World Wildlife Fund
By Cristiana Tonon

The text is taken from a WWF campaign whose goal is to raise awareness on the problem of poaching.

Most of the semiotic space is devoted to a visual metaphor that frames power as a pyramid. In this case, the use of a visual metaphor is particularly effective as it gives concreteness to a rather abstract concept. In this way, the addressee can clearly notice the consequences of a society structured according to an exploitative model.

With regard to the transitivity pattern resulting from this conceptualisation of power, it is noticeable that animals are confined to the lowest level of the pyramid, therefore they are represented as the affected participants of the material process of poaching. What is particularly interesting is that humans are represented not only as actors of the action, but also as victims themselves. Indeed, humans are part of a structure in which they are both
above and below someone else: in this way, they are represented as being the culprits, but also the victims of this system. This could outrage the addressee, but it could also raise a sense of injustice.

As far as the setting is concerned, we can notice that the higher the pyramid goes, the closer it gets to the sky. Moreover, this rising of the pyramid is related to the growth of the economic power of the people involved in it. Considering that in our collective imagination the sky is a heavenly place often associated with the image of God, we could conclude that the pyramid becomes a symbol of capitalism where money runs the world and is worshipped as a god.

As far as the slogan “Stop one. Stop them all.” is concerned, there are two different ways of interpreting it. The two clauses are in a relationship of condition-consequence: if you stop one of them, then you will stop them all. Nonetheless, the slogan can also be interpreted in the light of the Speech Act Theory by Austin. In this case, the slogan can be read as a command due to the use of the imperative form. In both cases, the message conveyed empowers the readers as it places them in a position where they can become active actors of a necessary change.

By using the pronoun “them”, the slogan distances the readers from the people who are responsible for that exploitative system. As a consequence, a dichotomy between an in-group and an out-group is created and the readers are excluded from the latter, which is formed by the people responsible for poaching. Together with the following sentence “Take action”, the text is a call for action to dismantle authoritative top-down hierarchies which have terrible implications for the ecosystem. It therefore creates and promotes a different story to promote pro-environmental behaviours.

In conclusion, it would be desirable to promote more visual metaphors that show the destructive consequences of an economic system based on detrimental hierarchies. In this sense, as images are cognitively less demanding than texts, visual metaphors become an important tool to encourage ecologically sustainable attitudes.

Reference

When forest grows awareness
By Larissa Paesani

"Trump Forest" is a movement founded to counterbalance Donald Trump’s policy on coal and to fight the climate ignorance the US President promotes. The idea is to plant more trees because they serve as nature’s carbon scrubbers.

The name of the movement is immediately remarkable because it represents a paradox: Trump is well-known for his destructive attitude towards nature. The expression, then, presents an oxymoronic feature. If we consider the movement’s name along with its slogan “Where ignorance grows trees”, we are tempted to establish a correlation between the words “Trump” and “ignorance” and between “forest” and “trees”. The matches are done in an unconscious way in the reader’s mind thanks to two strategies. In the slogan, the term “ignorance” has been personified because it is followed by the word “grows”, an action possible for living beings only. Within the second match, “forest” and “trees” are linked since they are two terms belonging to the same semantic field of nature. In this way, a double pattern has been established: opposition in a horizontal order and parallelism in a vertical order.

The double pattern has also been extended to the central part of the text. The link
Trump-ignorance is repeated in “He wants to ignore”. Trump is the agent of the action of ignoring something. The match is reinforced at the end in the phrase “Trump’s monumental stupidity”, where being stupid is thus presented as one of Trump’s peculiarities. The two negatively connotated terms “ignorance” (along with the verb “to ignore”) and “stupidity” linked to Donald Trump create an appraisal pattern that represents the US President in negative terms.

“Healthy life on Earth” and “renewable energy” are expressions that work in opposition to the Trump pattern and align with the forest-trees parallel because both promote care and respect for the environment. Since “healthy” and “renewable” are positively connotated terms, their link to “forest” and “trees” allows the creation of a positive appraisal pattern where nature is presented as being good. In addition, salience to the environment is given through the use of repeated words like “forest” and “trees”. By evoking concrete images of nature in the reader’s mind these words are more powerful and effective than more generic terms, like “nature” or “environment”. The image of the homepage contributes to adding salience to nature. It is as wide as the screen, has bright colours and it was taken from above using a high camera angle which suggests the powerlessness of the subject. It conveys the idea that nature depends on human actions and that it is human responsibility to protect its beauty.

The discourse of the website is rendered more appealing by the use of a colloquial style and ironic and irreverent expressions like “Breath easy, Mr President” and “Trump Forest”. Informality is conveyed through forms that directly address the readership; this is the case with “We need your help” and of the imperatives “Grow now” and “Take action”, in relation to donations.

According to the ecosophy of Arran Stibbe’s *Ecolinguistics: Language, Ecology and the Stories We Live by* (2015), this text is an example of beneficial discourse because it promotes knowledge about climate change, asks for donations in order to grow a forest, works towards resilience and portrays nature as worthy.

**References**


Geoengineering is fast and cheap, but not the key to stopping climate change
By Gabriella Sidari

Geoengineering is fast and cheap, but not the key to stopping climate change

Lowering the planet's temperature with sulphate aerosols could cost less than $10bn a year, but would leave future generations with a double catastrophe

Alternatively, the easy and fast way to reduce global temperatures would be through geoengineering. Spraying sulphate aerosols into the atmosphere would mimic the reflective particles released from volcanic eruptions, cooling the planet and returning us to pre-industrial temperatures. Such a project would probably be cheap – one tonne of sulphur dioxide would be sufficient to cancel out the climate effects of almost 30,000 tons of carbon dioxide, and Wagner and Weitzman estimate that the total cost of lowering the entire planet's temperature is likely to be less than $10bn per year. Due to the affordability of this project, any single country could unilaterally undertake a geoengineering project, bypassing the bureaucratic hurdles and perpetual gridlock of international agreements.

But the ease with which geoengineering could be used could actually be one of its biggest drawbacks. Governance difficulties multiply when every country and/or adventurous billionaire gains access to the world’s thermostat. And even if the technology were used responsibly, the aerosols would do nothing to halt ocean acidification and a myriad of other problems with carbon emissions. Furthermore, if the aerosol spraying was halted for some reason, the particles would be washed out of the sky within a month or so, and global temperatures would skyrocket faster than ever.

What could induce a sudden pause in geoengineering? Other risks to human civilisation such as pandemics, warfare, or geomagnetic storms could certainly make the maintenance of such a project much harder. As Seth Baum and his colleagues at the Global Catastrophic Risk Institute argue, some of the worst risks of geoengineering might be the link forged between climate catastrophes and other shocks to humanity. When the stability of our biosphere becomes dependent on the stability of our human infrastructure, we're baking in an automatic climate crisis to the next catastrophe. We really shouldn't place future generations in the position of facing two catastrophic risks at once. Climate change is bad enough, so let's cut emissions before geoengineering becomes too tempting to resist.
Two metaphors shape this text: “the planet is a patient” and “the planet is a machine”. These are evident in the first part, “reduce global temperatures” and “cooling the planet and returning us to pre-industrial temperatures”. “Geoengineering” is both the medicine administered by the doctor and the engineer fixing a broken machine.

Modality changes as we read. The empiricist repertoire simulates rationality (geoengineering is the “alternative”, “the easy and fast way to reduce”) and efficiency (the “project” would “fix” the problem), supported by the estimated “affordability” of the “project” which would empower any country unilaterally to finance the “fix” (affordability being the only criterion for any decision, here).

The second half of the text presents a “drawback” intrinsic to the very “affordability” of the “project”. After a simplistic explanation of what geoengineering is and the ease with which anyone (including single individuals, e.g. “adventurous billionaires”) could use it, we read that things would become difficult to govern when anyone has access to the “world’s thermostat” (domestic metaphor about heating).

Low modality is conveyed by the second conditional “even if … be used responsibly”, which implies that it will not. The following second conditional hides instead that the “project” would need to carry on continuously, indeterminately; “if aerosol spraying was halted” is a passivation that does not disclose by what or whom “particles would be washed out” (source frame: cleaning, target domain: particles discharged into the atmosphere by humans). However, activation follows: “global temperatures would skyrocket faster than ever”; any effort humans make to counter nature is thwarted by it, gleefully, as it seems.

The target reader may be businesspeople. Someone who tries to attain efficiency, looks at a business case, quickly grasps the issue and makes a decision about it using the neoclassical economics parameters of cost vs. benefit. The final sentence of the article has the atmosphere of a self-fulfilling prophecy and entails low moral scruples (despite an apparent concern which is weakly conveyed by “we really shouldn’t”) and a selfish disregard for other members of the one ecosystem as a whole (“future generations”).

The narrow scope on the issue (rising temperatures that need to be cooled) erases the fact that carbon dioxide is one among many dangerous emissions resulting from human activity. There are no criteria mentioned on how W&W have “estimated” the “total cost” and there is the assumption that the reader (seemingly in the in-group of the writer) would just as easily consider the amount required as affordable to any country or billionaire.

The cost versus benefit parameters, used to assess the situation, do not disclose who bears the costs, what they would be, and who would benefit from this action (assumed: human beings, presumed: the planet). In fact, the people who cause the damage are the very same ones that would then profit from (fixing) it.

There are no explicitly defined (human) actors in the text (Who conceived of geoengineering? Who does the spraying? Who decides geoengineering is cheap?); impersonalisation and passivation are used extensively to avoid attribution of responsibility.

Considerable erasure is noticeable throughout in the use of nominalisation,
disembodiment, and abstraction thus achieving total estrangement from non-human nature and assimilation to the machine.

Embodied Cognitive Theory posits that meaning is based in the body (through emotions, sensations). In the article, “geoengineering” is used as an abstraction calling no image to mind (no meaning through sensations). Consider, for example, if “perpetual poison discharge” were used instead.

To conclude, I quote Einstein: “we cannot solve our problem with the same thinking we used when we created them”.

Reference

It is up to us to save the hedgehog from inexorable decline
By Valentina Zanin

It is up to us to save the hedgehog from inexorable decline

No amount of rolling into a ball and hoping things will get better can save the animal from its decline

Like the sparrow, the once plentiful, almost ubiquitous hedgehog has suffered a precipitous decline in its population. No amount of rolling into a ball and hoping things will get better can save the hedgehog from its seemingly inexorable decline, as the first census for several years shows numbers are down by 50 per cent because of development and badgers. Homo sapiens must come to the rescue of Erinaceus europaeus.

Of course, hedgehogs can prove to be their own worst enemies, their natural curiosity getting the better of them all too often. We know very well, after all, that they have poor road sense. And while decent swimmers, for a rather hydrodynamic sort of shape, they aren’t much good at crawling out of garden pools or ponds. Only this week we heard the news that a Boltonian hedgehog had got its head stuck in a bottle of mayonnaise, later to be rescued by firefighters.

So we humans can do so much more to help the hedgehogs who cohabit with us on these isles: we can live in peaceful coexistence in a spirit of mutual respect and celebration in diversity. We: smooth, mostly hairless and big. They: spiny, fleas-ridden and small. Ideal compatriots.

We should drive more carefully and be hedgehog (and fox, and badger, for that matter) aware. We shouldn’t casually discard bottles of mayonnaise, and we should always cover pools and ponds. Slug pellets are bad for them, too, so are best avoided in our gardens. Log piles are welcome; they are, apparently, the ideal environment for a homeless hedgehog.

Oliver Colvile, Conservative MP for Plymouth, should be praised for his imaginative suggestion that the hedgehog should be granted the status of UK national animal, alongside the wren, the bulldog and the Scottish terrier. Often helpless, sometimes squashed but always game, they are a perfect reflection of the British temperament.
The editorial article, published on 21st November 2015 on *The Independent* official website, deals with the problem of the declining number of hedgehogs in the UK and affords concrete examples of human actions aimed at saving these animals. An ecolinguistic analysis can underline critical aspects about the problem of hedgehogs’ disappearance and raise awareness on recurring patterns in the text, which convey and define specific ecological identities in the relationship between human beings and animals.

Since the construction of ecological identities depends also on the kind of behaviour and actions that people can adopt in relation to the earth, the message conveyed can be considered beneficial, because it urges human beings to take action in favour of these animals. This conviction is linguistically evident and salient due to the use of modality with a high degree of commitment, as in the case of “we can do so much more”, “Slug pellets are bad for them”, “Log piles are welcome”, and some instances of lower degree of commitment such as “we should drive more carefully”, “we shouldn’t casually discard bottles”.

What is particularly noticeable from a linguistic point of view is how the text contributes to constructing in-groups and out-groups. As can be noticed, language provides different means for the development of identity groups, but at the same time, it draws the attention towards the opposition between the two groups: human beings and animals. A key tool in representing ecological identity is the use of pronouns; in the expression “we know very well” the inclusive pronoun “we” refers in fact to addressee, which are considered as part of the in-group (humans), whereas the use of exclusive pronoun “they” refers to the out-group (animals). Also particularly relevant in the construction of identities is the adoption of evaluative terms in referring to hedgehogs such as the adjectives “ubiquitous”, “decent”, “poor”, “good”, but also metaphors, like in “their own worst enemies” – in which the field of war (source domain) is transposed to depict hedgehogs’ vulnerability (target domain). Regarding the adjective “ubiquitous”, the evaluation is both positive and negative when it underlines the previous numerousness of the species in contrast to its decrease or when it refers to its troublesome presence for human beings, who are consequently forced to intervene for the salvation of these creatures.

Through these, and numerous other examples in the text, it is possible to assume that the clear opposition between identity groups contributes to the emergence of an implicit but specific appraisal pattern, namely “human is good”. In fact, the headline itself represents a tangible example of the recurrent pattern around human superiority over animals. In “It is up to us to save the hedgehog from inexorable decline”, the idea conveyed is that the human presence represents the only chance for hedgehogs to be safe from decline, which is presented here through a collocation reinforced by the evaluative term “inexorable”.

It can be concluded that the article should not be simply regarded as either beneficial or destructive discourse in itself, but may be seen as potentially dangerous if human actions in favour of animals’ safety are confused with human supremacy to the detriment of
animals’ vulnerability.

Reference

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Goldman Sachs: As long as consumers keep shopping, there’s hope for the economy

By Stefano Boldi

For a market that’s become increasingly jittery over the U.S. economy, Goldman Sachs has a message: All is not lost.

Wall Street’s head-spinning volatility, which last week shaved more than 1,000 points off the Dow Jones Industrial Average, has pushed stocks into correction territory and raised fears for 2019. Although falling stocks and rising interest rates will continue to weigh on sentiment, those negatives are likely to be offset by higher wages and oil prices in retreat, Goldman said in a research note to clients Saturday.

“Three of the key drivers of consumer spending send a positive message for the near-term outlook,” the bank’s analysts wrote.

“First, real disposable income is likely to continue its strong growth due to accelerating wage growth, and recent declines in the oil price are likely to be a significant tailwind to spending in 2019,” Goldman said. November’s jobs data released on Friday showed lower-than-expected payrolls growth but wages growing at the fastest rate in nearly a decade.

“Second, the saving rate looks elevated relative to the high level of household wealth, even after the recent sell-off,” the analysts wrote. And with consumer spending — which comprises 2/3rd of the vast U.S. economy — still strong, “consumer sentiment is likely to stay elevated, reflecting strong underlying economic fundamentals as well as optimism about the labor market and income growth,” the firm said.

Goldman’s relatively upbeat assessment came against a backdrop of a market buffeted by internal and external risks — most notably the U.S.’ ongoing trade war with China. The Dow has erased its gains for the year, while the S&P 500 pulled back 2.3 percent to 2,633.08 and turned negative for the year.
The news article taken from the website Consumer News and Business Channel (CNBC) is written by Senior Editor Javier E. David.

Looking at the picture and the headline we can safely assume that the aim of both the journalist and the company (Goldman Sachs Group Inc.) is to convince American people that the only way to “save” the economy is by spending more: let’s see why.

The picture is an example of many stories-we-live-by: it is taken in the Fifth Avenue, one of the most famous (and expensive) shopping streets in the world; the focus of the camera is on two middle-aged women walking down the street carrying a plethora of shopping bags, a clear example of gender and age-defined identities (that, in this case, reflect actual statistical data); their warm clothing, along with the designer bags and the date of publication of the news article (9th of December) are also clear indications that what we are seeing here is shopping for presents before Christmas (one of the most widespread stereotypes). It is conveniently the perfect time of the year to push the consumeristic agenda. This salience pattern (Christmas, shopping, wages and economy) occurs multiple times in the text.

The body of the article begins with a high epistemic modality statement and a metaphor (“For a market that’s become increasingly jittery”): the source domain of the metaphor is human emotion and the target domain is Economics, which is also the case of another metaphor used at the beginning of the following paragraph (“Wall Street’s head-spinning volatility”). Another rather frequently used metaphor is growth which is employed to describe economic phenomena: its source domain is Agriculture (crop growth is often associated with economic prosperity) and the target domain is Economics (“disposable income is likely to continue its strong growth due to accelerating wage growth.”).

Goldman Sachs’ message, “All is not lost” is the first of a series of “messages of hope/salvation” against fear (one of the strongest human emotions, frequently used to push agendas) caused by the stock market’s volatility. War is also being reframed (from conventional war to trade war) to increase feelings of fear and doubt in the reader “[...] notably the U.S.’ ongoing trade war with China”.

Evaluation by the journalist and the Bank is also present (“a positive message for the near-term outlook” - “those negatives are likely to be offset by higher wages”): the diminishing oil prices and Christmas sales figures are examples of this, as we perceive them to be inherently good for us while we ignore the impact on nature and on personal debt, which the journalist makes no mention of in the article (erasure).

It is clear how the journalist and Goldman Sachs are trying to persuade people to empty their pockets with a carefully timed statement that spreads fear and doubt while, at the same time, they also provide a rather easy and quite appealing solution: “go shop and you’ll save the country.”

Reference

Goldman Sachs: As long as consumers keep shopping, there’s hope for the economy.
KFC are giving away free fries for Black Friday – and you don’t have to buy a single thing

By Erika Capovilla

KFC are giving away free fries on Black Friday - and you don't have to buy a single thing

Free food - with no catch. This may be the best Black Friday deal yet...

Forget all the super cheap tellys and £200 PS4 bundle deals, because the best Black Friday deal of 2018 so far has just been announced - and it includes free chips from KFC.

The fast food giant has just announced that it will be handing out free portions of its brand new and improved fries on Black Friday this year - and there’s no catch.

Everyone can get their hands on the tasty freebie, all you need to do is download KFC’s app (if you haven’t already) on either Android or Apple, and access the offer, which can be redeemed in your local participating restaurant. Then just show it to the cashier, and you'll get one free portion of fries per person. The dream.

If you've not seen the big announcement that was KFC’s new chip recipe, the American chicken brand's new fries are thicker and wider than before (all the better for dipping with) and also the whole spud is used, with the skin left on, for a more natural appearance.

The added chunkiness also means they apparently keep their heat for longer, so they're delicious even on the go too and don't go sad and soggy like their previous highly-critiqued predecessors.

Hazell White, CRM & Loyalty Manager at KFC UK & Ireland, said: “We've been blown away by the response we've had to our new fries – it's a dream come true. To say thanks, we thought we'd give our fans a chance to try the new fries for free this Black Friday.”

While previously a holiday only celebrated by technology fans and coupon collecting American mums after the last big TV in Walmart, the huge money-saving sales event that is Black Friday has hit Britain hard this year, and after this news, we're certainly not complaining.
The article, published on 20th November 2018 by Molly Holt in the *Daily Mirror*, deals with the latest KFC’s publicity stunt, which offered its new French fries for free on Black Friday. In this paper I analyse this text from the point of view of ecoclinguistics, aiming at exposing and resisting the problematic and ubiquitous discourse that underlies this text, i.e., that of consumerism, in this case expressed as the urge to buy the new fries.

The text is structured in order to involve the readers, as suggested by both the catchy informal style (“tellys”, “catch”, “spud”, for example), rich in phrasal verbs and contractions, and by the rhetorical devices, such as alliterations (“free fries on Black Friday”) and numerous repetitions (“free”, “new”, “chips”). Worth mentioning are also the metaphors “fast food giant” and “it’s a dream come true”, where the world of magic and fairy-tales (source domain) is exploited to portray the ideal world related to economic growth (target domain).

Furthermore, the article is full of evaluative terms that contribute to several appraisal patterns: “convenient/free is good” (rendered through terms like “free”, “deal” and “freebie”), “new is good” (“brand new and improved”) and “large is good” (“thicker and wider”).

As far as the construction of identity of the people involved is concerned, their categorisation into two specific groups based on their activity is particularly significant: the “owners” (KFC) and the “consumers” (the readership). By addressing the latter through the second person plural, the journalist establishes a commonality, representing them as a mass with the common purpose of consumption; they are therefore positioned within the consumerist frame (as demonstrated by the numerous terms related to the idea of “saving”) and consequently described as active, as “sensers” in mental processes and “actors” in material processes. Taking all this into account, there is solid evidence that the text belongs to the discourse of neoclassical economy, namely the idea that consumers maximise their satisfaction through the purchase of goods. Consistent with this aim is also the high facticity of truth in the representation of KFC’s offer as unbeatable, reinforced by the use of several epistemic expressions indicating a high degree of commitment (like “there’s no catch” and “means that”).

The last aspect that should be highlighted is the salience pattern of consumption, shaped by the use of concrete language and images, whose warm colours are carefully selected in the images and layout to activate the viewers’ attention – and hunger; equally significant is nonetheless the presence of an erasure pattern (void), for there is no reference to the reflection on the ecological effects of this “catch”.

It can be concluded that the article is rich in devices that may lure the readers into the cycle of consumerism. This text should not be simply labelled as a beneficial or destructive discourse in itself, but regarded in its context of use: it may be potentially dangerous, since it might easily become ecologically damaging for the environment and human beings in the likely event that consumption becomes overconsumption and quantity takes priority over quality.
Reference

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