



ENTREVISTA COM ECOLINGUISTAS

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BRIEF PRESENTATION

Em ECO-REBEL v. 5, n. 2, 2019, p. 6-7, já se encontra um “A short autobiographical background” (breve pano de fundo autobiográfico). Para acessá-lo, clique em:

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INTERVIEW

- **ECO-REBEL:** Professor Finke, when and why did you begin talking about what later came to be called Ecolinguistics?

- **Peter Finke:** Shortly after I returned from St. Catherine’s College at Oxford university to Göttingen in Germany 1967 and still being a student I began regular walks with my slightly older linguist friend Siegfried Kanngießer (who unfortunately died already 15 years ago). He was among the first who followed the new paths of Noam Chomsky in Germany (“Syntactic Structures” was six years old, the “Aspects”-book had appeared only two years (1965) before) and because of philosophical and metatheoretical reasons I was both highly interested and critical at the same time by what I heard from Siegfried. On the other hand, my old interests in birds and nature that could have led me to study biology instead of philosophy and linguistics were revived again and I was especially fascinated by the biological theories of ecology and evolution. But officially, there was no link between

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linguistics and biology. For each of our walks I prepared a paper that I put forward for discussion. And it was in these papers that I saw more and more creative relations and perspectives between the two subjects. I had no knowledge of Haugen's book, but I am quite sure that I would have been very disappointed by his understanding of ecology.

- **EC:** Do you see any misunderstanding in what is being done under the name of Ecolinguistics? If yes, could you give some examples?

- **PF:** In my view the whole thing is full of misunderstandings. Today, many people talk about what they take to be ecology, including linguists, but that is merely an emotional and political phrase and has nearly nothing to do with science. Better I tell no names; the scene is full of people thinking that ecological linguistics is "soft language use" or engaging linguistically for the benefit for animals. From a scientific view this is nonsense. If I would not had an important addition to my own consciousness on ecology, mainly originated by Gregory Bateson's "ecology of mind", I would include my own person in that group of misunderstanders. Ecology is no longer simply a part of biology, as I thought in that old times, and ecolinguistics not only a part of biolinguistics.

- **EC:** Don't you think that many essays purportedly ecolinguistic could just as well be done from a, let's say, sociological point of view?

- **PF:** O yes, quite so. Not many, but the most. It begins with Haugen and is similarly so with most writings of most "ecolinguists" of today.

- **EC:** If we apply an existing theoretical model, like Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis, to the analysis of an environmental problem are we doing Ecolinguistics?

- **PF:** No. Linguistics is more than Discourse Analysis. Language is another thing than Discourse. It allows discourse, but still before it allows cognition.

- **EC:** In the same vein, if we investigate an environmental disaster picking some concepts from (biological, philosophical) Ecology and using them metaphorically are we doing Ecolinguistics?

- **PF**: No. Firstly, we need no environmental disaster to investigate into ecological problems connected with language. If as a scientist you only will awake for realizing ecological problems after noting an environmental disaster, you have slept for too long before. Secondly, ecolinguistics as I understand it has nothing to do with metaphorical use of ecological terms. Well-built ecolinguistic terms are scientific terms in their own right and scientific terms are no mere metaphors. Ecolinguistics may well analyze the metaphors that we use in our ordinary talking from an ecological standpoint; but the ecolinguistic metalanguage should not be metaphorical at all, just as any other scientific language.

- **EC**: We understand that Ecolinguistics should look at its object of study from a holistic point of view. Do you think that all the essays dealing exclusively with environmental problems follow this principle?

- **PF**: No, not at all. But that is a different problem. It has to do with the weak and superficial understanding of present day science. Most people, including present day professional scientists, do not reflect the history of science. They simply think “science is science” and underrate or even neglect the changes science did undergo in the course of history. In this process there was a major weight layed on details and too little on connections and wholes. Francis Bacon’s “Novum Organum” from 1620 (400 years ago!) played a leading part in that fateful decision in favour of the parts and underestimation of the wholes. But I hesitate using the concept of holism although I don’t oppose to it. The reason for this hesitation is that I mistrust the utility of such terms of a technical terminology. People take them as solutions, but they are less: they indicate problems.

- **EC**: The logotype of the Brazilian Meetings on Ecolinguistics (EBE) reads: *Ecolinguista sum; linguistici nihil a me alienum puto*. Do you agree with this?

- **PF**: That sounds nice and open-hearted, but I should not think that saying to be very helpful. It’s too generous, too liberal, invitating all who like to come. The meetings organized by Alwin Fill in Europe ten or twenty years ago followed a similar generosity. That’s nice for young scientists but it weakens the subjects principles.

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- **EC:** In other words, do you agree with the idea that Ecolinguistics should be a general framework for the study of any language phenomena, including grammatical ones?

- **PF:** In my view, this is not saying the same “in other words”. But yes, I agree with this wording very much. If you are doing ecolinguistics you have – in my opinion – an idea of a better linguistics. And that must be recognizable on all linguistic levels including the grammatical. In fact this is a central level not only in traditional linguistics but – as I see it – in ecolinguistics too. Ecolinguists who only speak about semantical, pragmatical or communicative issues and not at all about syntax and cognition are rightly not be taken serious by their colleagues of other schools. And by me, too.

- **EC:** How would you define Ecolinguistics?

- **PF:** *Ecolinguistics is a newer school of linguistics that explains the ecosystemic character of language by its evolutionary history and relates the use of language to the problems of the surrounding world. Or to say the same in a bit more explicit way: Ecolinguistics is a scientific conception of linguistics that reveals the ecosystemic structure and function of the human languages within the framework of transdisciplinary science. It explains languages as having evolutionarily developed from older natural ecosystems in the course of the emerging cognitive basics for the complex use of symbols within the new cultural purposes of man.*

- **EC:** What is *Sprache-Welt-System* (language-world-system) in your philosophical approach to Ecolinguistics?

- **PF:** In this term I use the term Welt (or world) as meaning everything what language is about and refers to. In a certain sense you cannot talk about language and nothing else. Language is a referring system that needs something which it refers to. Interestingly, this could even be language too. But most references are something different. They are not linguistic but situated in the non-linguistic world.

- **EC:** We know that you are also interested in culture and economics. Why? What do they have to do with Ecolinguistics?

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- **PF**: I am still more interested in nature since that is basic. The web of nature is the source of my ecological interests. And they are tightly bound to evolution. Culture is an evolutionary daughter of nature, beginning in the animal world already. Man has grossly enriched this realm by making use of the new abstract functions of his languages. They are very rich in developing new functionings of a new symbolic system. Human economics should similarly be organized in a sustainable way as languages are by learning from the functioning and proven economics of nature, but until now we do not obey their rules. The result is the deplorable state of the earth.

- **EC**: Do you think that culture does not have anything to do with nature and that social facts derive from social facts?

- **PF**: That's nonsense. On the contrary: Culture is an evolutionary daughter of nature and is up to the present day recognizable as such, even in theatre, poetry, art, music and other highly abstract forms of culture. Social facts are not founded on the base of natural laws but on cultural rules. We are free to change them. This may prove to be very difficult because of the given array of power, but it is possible. The powers of nature are not open to the manipulation of man. Nevertheless, rules are evolutionary children of the natural laws.

- **EC**: The kind of Ecolinguistics we practice in Brazil, Ecosystemic Linguistics, does not agree with the definition of language, by most theories of language, as an instrument of communication because it reifies language. What do you have to say about this?

- **PF**: You are right. The theories of language which define their object by communication are very bad indeed. Most animals communicate but they use quite different communication systems; language is a human speciality. The typical and special feature of language is not communication but its particularity of opening a wide range of cognition. Even quite many "ecolinguists" – presumably the most – do not manage to realize this point.

- **EC**: We are all aware of the fact that Ecolinguistics is considered a minority's, "alternative" discipline. Would it be good for it if it one day becomes mainstream Linguistics?

- **PF**: Are we really "all aware" of ecolinguistics as being a minority's "alternative discipline"? I certainly thought this to be the case ten or twenty years ago. But since then

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there was suddenly a huge hype of people feeling themselves as “ecolinguists”. But I tried to explain this as being not well-understood. I therefore concentrated for some years on other problems of our modern world, mainly economics. When I asked Sune Steffensen some years ago what one could currently name as the center of ecolinguistics, he replied that could be China. I was very much astonished. And that should still be a “minority’s discipline”? Yes, I think so, within the realm of linguistic schools. But I think that could change. When the ecolinguists become better and no longer behave as outsiders but demonstrate ecolinguistics as offering better solutions to the old linguistic questions, then it could become mainstream linguistics. Present day ecolinguistics will never get on that road.

- **EC:** How do you see the future of Ecolinguistics?

- **PF:** If you mean the majority of today’s people thinking themselves as “ecolinguists”, I see no rational future in science. They work on their emotions and this is scientifically worthless. It may become a popular pastime of some people but no relevant part of linguistics. This could only be the case with an ecolinguistics which takes central concepts as ecology, evolution, nature and culture, language, systems, science or theory as serious scientific concepts.

- **EC:** Is there anything you would like to add? Feel free to use the space you need.

- **PF:** No. You have asked me quite good questions! – Well, there might be one point: You did not ask me on my conception of science. But I am mainly a critical researcher on science and this governs my thinking on linguistics, too. It is the deplorable state of the earth that is a very objective witness of the factual effects of our past and present scientific practices. As I said formerly, in the history of science we made a major mistake by thinking that details are more important than wholes. The most visible effect was the decomposition of science itself into the different sciences all of which feel important in their own right. Today it seems justified that all the hundreds (or thousands?) of sciences take their own view on the problems, but they perceive their tasks without seeing the whole thing and without feeling responsible for the joint effects on the earth. Therefore, after the second world war we observed a strong movement to change this, the movement towards interdisciplinarity. But the real problem is not to be solved by interdisciplinarity but by transdisciplinarity only. Since you cannot fall back behind disciplinarity without big losses of knowledge on

thousands of details, and interdisciplinarity only produces stronger looking-glasses on still finer details, the new movement of the present age is that of realizing transdisciplinarity: not trying to abolish the disciplines or simply to create new ones, but to educate a new generation of scientists who are keen to learn new perspectives on wholes, contexts, correlations and connections overlooked by the shortsightedness of the traditional disciplines looking for still more details of details. I place ecolinguistics decidedly in such a transdisciplinary framework looking for the wholes and complex interconnections. Language is a master object for such a form of science. But this affords a fundamental change of the scientific culture we have, and that is not easy to achieve. In fact, we have a deplorable state of our common theorizing of science, too. But to develop a new transdisciplinary culture of science is without alternative if we really want to save our planet. I think however, that a consequent ecolinguistic point of view could at least develop linguistics to become a good pacemaker towards that goal.

- EC: Thank you very much Professor Finke.

Selected References

- P. Finke (1982), Konstruktive Ökologische Linguistik. Part II of „Politizität“. In: P. Finke (ed.), Sprache im politischen Kontext. Ergebnisse aus Bielefelder Forschungsprojekten zur Anwendung linguistischer Theorien. Tübingen: Niemeyer; pp. 15-75. (*This was the first systematic publication of my views in print, following some shorter accounts beginning in 1977*).
- P. Finke (2014), The Ecology of Science and its Consequences for the Ecology of Language. In: Steffensen, S.V./A. Fill (eds.), Ecolinguistics. The State of the Art. *Language Science Special Issue 41*. Amsterdam: Elsevier; pp 71-82. (*This is a short account of my views on ecolinguistics*).
- P. Finke (2019), Linguistics at the End of the Baconian Age, or: five Essentials of Ecolinguistics. In: The Aalpiri-Papers. Two Critical Reflections on Contemporary Ecolinguistics. Edited by Sune Vork Steffensen. With contributions of Peter Mühlhäusler and Peter Finke. Special booklet published for the 4th International Conference on Ecolinguistics, SDU, 12th-15th of August 2019. The article of P. Finke it to be found on pp. 28-42. Reprinted in: *ECO-REBEL* v. 5, n. 1, 2019. (*This is a general overview of my views on ecolinguistics within the surrounding actual problems of science*).

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