An Ecological Reading of a Scientific Text on Psychoneuroimmunology

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Abstract:

In the article, we catch up with a discussion on the implications of trans-disciplinary research and especially the problem of recontextualization of the texts. By means of a deictic, modal and metaphorical analysis of a text on a transdisciplinary field, the so-called 'psychoneuroimmunology', we show how a problematic axiomatic basis and an unhealthy system of authority of the 'basic' sciences is reproduced in the new context.

1. Ecological linguistics

Ecological linguistics is an umbrella term for "[...] all approaches in which the study of language (and languages) is in any way combined with ecology" (Fill 1993:126). Discussions among ecological linguists concerning the definition of 'ecology' in this particular context (e.g. Alexander 1996), i.e. the limitation of the object of ecological linguistics have made it clear that while some researchers constrain their objective to awareness of the presentation of environmental problems in texts, others work from a broader perspective. Among these are the founders of Danish Dialectal Linguistics (the Odense School of Ecological Linguistics), whose definition says that:

We define linguistics in a dialectical way that should imply an ecologically reflected organization of persons and problems concerned about the phenomenon of language.

(Bang/Doer 1998:7)

From this perspective, a dialectical theory is also an ecological theory because of the relational method of investigation. Furthermore, the perception of environment as ideologically, sociologically and biologically constituted and constituting implies that all vital interpersonal relations are part of ecological questions. This
logic determine what can be said and known. If the context of production and that of consumption are dominated by contradictions of authority, we regard the process of recontextualisation as part of a pedagogic practice, i.e. a social context in which cultural (re)production and change take place (Bernstein 2000).

5. A trans-disciplinary, ecolinguistic analysis of a trans-scientific text

Up till now, we have sketched out our theoretical perspectives on ecolinguistics as a transdisciplinary science. We will now exemplify the problem of the isolation of scientific disciplines by means of a trans-scientific analysis of deictic, modal and metaphoric features in the text introduced above. The text was published in a Danish magazine on health and life style in 1995.

The text originates from a context of the academic society, which sets some boundaries for what is legitimate knowledge and what could be said and how it could be said. We notice that the subject of the text, psychoneuroimmunology, is an example of rationalization of knowledge (Bernstein 2000). The regionalization of the academic field was developed in the last five decades of the past century as a new principle for the distribution of knowledge and is closely connected with the technologisation of knowledge. Secondly, the text is written by an academic researcher with a natural scientific background, but addressed to ordinary people with a certain interest in a holistic conception of health. This complex process of recontextualisation lays the text open for ideological considerations.

We will refer to Bang and Door’s four categories of context in order to explicate the vital relations between the textual syntax, its semantics and the pragmatics constituted by living persons in communication.
6. The context of the producer and the production of the text

The author of the text who is a female former researcher on genetics is now engaged in the development of psychoneuroimmunology, which we regard as a sort of an ecological way of exploring an area of the natural sciences. In the field of psychoneuroimmunology, the subject is responsible for her health and for the process of her own healing. The text was published in 1995 in a Danish magazine titled My Health. The magazine is edited by scientists with a certain interest in holistic research on sociology and health. In the editorial text it is stressed that the magazine is independent and has no connections to any sect. We notice that here the text is already double voiced: in one sense, the magazine signals a break with biomedicine – on the other hand the editors stress their interdependency, and the policy statement becomes vague. Furthermore, we interpret the use of a negation as the reminiscence of a piece of dialogue with a third, but hidden subject, the biomedical tradition. We conclude from this observation that the editors are deeply subjected to the social import of the institutional logics, which they feel highly indebted too as the contractors of academic identity. Our observations on the phenomena of ‘double voice’ will be in focus throughout the following chapter.

7. The context of the communicators and the communication of the text

In our theoretical presentation we related our ecological linguistic tradition to the dialogical principle and discussed the presence of a third subject in dialogue as an important category of a dialogical theory of communication and we already introduced one possible mute subject which we considered to be that of the academic institution of biomedicine. As academic researchers ourselves, we recognize the dilemma as a recurrent problem, which we do not pretend to have solved either, namely the problem of fixing an order of priority. To whom do we address our writings? To those whom they concern – e.g. the subjects ‘out there’ or the academic
field? To whom do we feel indebted? Mostly, teachers, doctors and other authorities are by convention more interested in social sharing with other authorities than with their pupils, patients and clients — a choice that positions the latter as objects for consideration among academics and not participants and addressees.

We chose the text on psychoneuroimmunology because it shows the author's exemplary attempt to change unhealthy logics and conceptions of the subject as a machine, subjected to a capitalist societal context. But the text also lays open the dilemmas that are involved. We will substantiate this allegation by means of a deictic, modal and metaphorical analysis of the text.

According to The Model of Reference, the reference to the contexts in question is actualized linguistically by means of the deictic categorization of the text. Thus, the extra-textual references, which constitute the TOPOS of the text, are important foci. Traditionally, deictic categories are limited to include personal pronouns and time/place references. In our dialectical theory of language we also consider the indicators of logics as deictic features. Logical deixis not only comprises the so-called logical terms (all, none, some, many, etc.) but also modality. This approach to the category of deixis makes it possible for the analyst to uncover and point out the implicit logics of the text and categorizes them as extra-textual features. As linguistic examples of this strategy we will draw attention to the frequent use of the zero subject 'you' and the fact that this pronoun sometimes refers to the individual as a self reflexive and responsible subject of her/his own life, sometimes to a scientific community with an unlimited power to define The Truth.

The metaphorical features substantiate our initial observations and articulate an implicit submission to capital and bureaucratic logics. Thus we observe several examples of references to Science as an indisputable authority that also rules attempts to develop new approaches to health:

I dag er der videnskabeligt beløb for, at tankes og følelsesfremstilling fra belastende livshelseværelser påvirker immunsystemet. Today it is scientifically proved that thoughts and feelings from embarrassing events of life influence the immune system.
We regard the reference to an unmarked ‘science’ and the taking over of the idea of the relation between body and environment as a question of defense (the disease-as-war metaphor). According to Lakoff and Johnson’s (1980) categorization of metaphor, we notice first and foremost that the mind is interpreted as an entity. The following fragments of the text will exemplify our observations. In the translation, we’ve given the voice of the Danish text priority over a ‘correct’ English reproduction. The text begins with the following statement:

Vi bør alle jævntligt se ind i vores psyke og ‘rykke op’. We all ought to look inside our mind regularly and ‘tidy it up’.

Den indre livskvalitet er optimal, hvis man forstår at manøvriere der, hvor man psykisk set befinder sig. The inner quality of life is optimal if one knows how to manoeuvre right there, where one is mentally.

The idea of the mind as an entity expresses a viewpoint that conflicts with the idea of a holistic science. The traditional biomedical idea of the mind as a machine is also present:

Den processo kan ofte sættes i gang i løbet af få samtaler, hvor en patient hjælpes til at arbejde med ‘at kende det indre hånd om’. The process can often be started during few talks where a patient is helped to work on a recording of the internal tape.

The aim of capital logic is to produce profit by work. In the text, this logic is promoted by means of several metaphors, which are applied to the mental healing of the subject:

Man skal selv ville udføre et stykke arbejde. You ought to be willing to carry out the job yourself.

Det kan betale sig at rytte op i sin psyke. It pays to tidy up one’s mind.

As already suggested, we also meet traces of the disease-as-war metaphor that has been scientifically described (e.g. by Susan Sontag) and criticized for decades. Thus, our linguistic observations point to this so-called subject-oriented theory as a method to establish a double hind: theoretically, the individual is positioned as responsible for her own life and health – on the other hand, s/he
is subjected by an authoritarian and dehumanized voice, positioned as a consumer of the underlying logics of capitalism. In a further societal perspective we see this double bind as an effect of the ongoing marketization and bureaucratization of institutions of various kinds, including the health services, a process that has increased during the last three decades. We are now aware of the fact that war and war metaphors promote resistance and lead to a dehumanizing language use and activity. We regard love and trust as the contradiction of war and hatred. But love and trust assume empathy and interest and first of all words. That is where dialogue comes in. Thus, the resistance against dialogue, which characterizes the biomedical philosophy, is to be interpreted as an effect of the limiting rationality and sound mind. Medical treatment is, when isolated, a totally anonymous process. The producer of the medicaments is anonymous, the person who makes out the medicine is faceless and so is the user of the medicamental treatment. Thus, this object-dominated approach becomes a contribution to social control and might be used as such to keep the population in check - wordless. Both parts - doctor and patient - avoid a linguistic formulation of what the subject is about.

As an alternative to the depersonalization outlined above, psychoneuroimmunology is expected to be a dialogical science: it is a relatively new branch of medical science that we regard as a new way of reflection of the interpretation of the body, and disease/health, which has dominated the biomedical approach. We regard psychoneuroimmunology as an attempt to develop an ecological approach to health because of the democratic and relational aspects that are outlined in the underlying theoretical considerations. But a crucial aspect of democratic and relational thinking is to take the Others' world seriously. The Other, however, is absent in the text under scrutiny. As far as we can see, the problem is due to the individualistic philosophy that underlies the text and the hidden subjection to capitalist logic.

On the other hand we notice that the author is aware of the fact that our linguistic practices are closely bound up with metaphorical conceptualizations, which condition our perception of ourselves and the world, and that the time has come to break with the cognitive axiology they sustain in order to elaborate alternative cognitive and more ecological orientations: the final part of the ar-
The context of the consumers and the consumption of the text

The words we use are already parts of a semantic field as others have already used them in multiple local settings, and so they become constituents of actual dialogues trailing meaning from the past. The language producer has to work with the uses others before him/her have made of the word, reproduce them or change them by adding his or her own intention, own accent, adapting it to our individual meanings. Thus, to speak or write is always essentially dialogic and a life line to history. From this perspective, any utterance is a vital reworking of terms that have already been given meaning elsewhere in the dialogues of others. Hence, the heterogeneity of voices in a dialogue is not only due to the different voices in the text, but also in movements between one voice and another in continuous sequences, so that one is embedded in the other. As already described above, the logics of societal