

Sorry for Bothering, but Words of Hope must be Rescued. An (almost) Narrative Review of Ecolinguistics

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Abstract

This text describes the situation of a scholar either divided between two fields, linguistics and ecology, or between two types of discourse, literature and science. It intends to be a demonstration of powerful insights that in part could be gained through a long contact with the now international school of ecolinguistics, to which the author adhered in 1995. The rather unnatural way academic papers tend to be written is described and a hybrid presentation technique is followed, associating descriptive accuracy with some instances of narration. The narrative spots are used in order to reflect on, and criticize, some ways of communicating in the academic milieu, especially in times of financial scarcity and of competitive individual survival strategies. On the other hand, ecolinguistics is presented through several examples as a scientific and philosophical discipline which aims at understanding how language shapes and is shaped by thought on environmental matters. The relation between town and countryside is also discussed, especially the partially unfulfilled dreams of a self-sufficient life away from the city, as those lifestyles may imply the danger of isolating people from their communities. The problems of developing a «close» language, based on proximity, of knowing what to eat in the middle of contradictory discourses and the option for organic, yet urban or peri-urban agriculture, are also addressed. In connection to these topics, the Portuguese idiom *words are like cherries* has here the status of a leading metaphor for hope, for it not only explains how this particular text evolved but it also supports the idea that nature (and some types of language as well) is primarily something good and healthy.

Keywords: Ecolinguistics; Language; Ecology; Environment; Urban Agriculture; Scientific Discourse; Narrative

Introduction

«Sorry...» Right after writing this word on the highly appealing blank page I started: «This is by no means a good way to begin an academic paper! How on earth did this word come to my mind at this very moment?» Chance might have had an influence, maybe my unconscious mind or some details of the context. I probably meant «sorry for bothering the reader with unimportant stuff», but it could also have been that, after a period of silence following some of my previous academic activity [1-8], I was feeling sorry for only now returning to the area of studies which inspired that work, as well as other aspects of my life: ecolinguistics – either in its beginnings [9-14], or as it developed more recently [15-17], in Portuguese through the Brazilian school [18] or in Portugal [19 and 4]. Basically, this school of linguistic thought associates the study of language to the study of the environment. To me this means that the question above, and in general some of the verbal and non-verbal environments that helped shape this paper, do matter.

I was sitting in my office at the University of Coimbra and I hadn't met almost anybody until that moment. Everyone had finished their lectures and exams, and that was also my situation as a university professor, from that moment onwards: it seemed that after a year of particularly intense lecturing, bureaucratic and other professional activities, especially due to an ongoing curricular reform intending to shrink the number of courses on account of less money available (and thus probably leaving some staff unemployed), my colleagues at the Faculty of Letters were relieved to be finally able to stay at home for a few weeks, either with the purpose of quietly reviewing their academic year, or in order to breathe at last and get ready for the next semester. But maybe I was wrong: one could think they were simply hiding from each other in their own offices or homes, a little bit like I sometimes do, especially under the prospect of a highly competitive yet uncertain future (as it also seems to be the case in the German context [20] and [21]).

July was a good time of the year for academic writing, especially if the weather was fine, and I was grateful that a strangely mild summer – probably due to unprecedented climate change – hadn't been exactly corresponding to the usual dire prospects, meaning extreme heat in my country, of global warming. I believe many of my colleagues naturally chose their homes to get inspired, attempting to fulfill the each day more demanding evaluation requisites of an academic career. Minutes before I sat down at the university to start working on this paper, one colleague whom I did actually meet on that day at the corridor, before entering my office, answered my rhetorical question «Still here?! » with the expression «que remédio...», a very typical Portuguese idiom probably implying that she had no alternative («remedy») and would rather be at home. After that, however, she went out of words, for she hastily disappeared, as if it was extremely painful to spend some time chatting face-to-face with somebody else while at the same time giving the impression that one is working very hard and efficiently. The interpersonal game of competition is based on striving to keep the appearances of a busy profile.

¹The so-called «troika» has evaluated Portuguese accounts in order to determine the financial needs of the country. The team, which negotiated and evaluated the Portuguese financial bailout program, was composed by Jürgen Kröger (European Commission), Poul Thomsen (International Monetary Fund) and Rasmus Ruffer (Central European Bank). The group was also responsible for negotiating the conditions for a financial bailout in Greece, Cyprus and Ireland, and for evaluating the way the program was being implemented. See also: <http://politicaportugal.com/mas-afinal-o-que-e-a-troika/>.

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This is what happens presently in my home country, Portugal, not only at universities. After three long years of economic supervision by the so-called «troika» (composed of one member of the European Commission, one member of the Central European Bank and one member of the International Monetary Fund)¹, our public institutions were in general left in an uncomfortable financial situation, due to austerity measures decreed by the Portuguese government. These measures followed an intense pressure from controlling instances of other EU countries, inculcating a sense of shame and inferiority for past «sins» in the Portuguese population, while at the same time imposing a significant (nevertheless beneficial) reduction of the public debt inherited by previous years of European funding. This funding, however, had heavily contributed to establish an expensive consumption-oriented market «economy», to a large extent dictated by multinational corporations and financial institutions and involving profits that didn't exactly stay in Portugal. Daily news stressing the idea that the present scarcity was the people's fault could well have the kind of communicative effect I mentioned above.

No wonder people increasingly tend to hide from each other, especially in working environments (where computers are a good way to escape). Civil servants are forced to harshly compete with each other for increasingly scarce resources or workplaces, now that the ongoing privatization of important assets of our economy is underway. It is frequent to hear the completely wrong idea that whatever is «public» is inefficient and unproductive, so it must be centralized, then dismantled and finally handed over in pieces, sector by sector, to private interests. Younger generations have almost given up waiting for a job in correspondence to their qualifications and started to migrate, especially to northern European countries, which will profit from the investment made in their education at home, as a new wave of qualified emigration is now affecting almost every family in Portugal. Old people are left to die in hospitals, without family support. Nurses and doctors are starting to go away (only in 2014, according to the daily newspaper *Público* of 31.12.2014, 269 doctors have initiated the process of leaving the country).

The way people use language in the academic sphere also changed. These were already years of submission to external powers some time before troika's intervention, when efforts to increase the amount of administrative burdens controlling and measuring every detail of the work in academic professions have strongly contributed not only to significantly enhance the academic productivity and self-esteem in some fields, something which is undoubtedly positive, but also to almost completely wipe away important niches of genuine creativity, pretty much as Münch and Finke describe [20] and [21]. Silence is thus understandably the best way to avoid a new tacit rule: hurting or getting hurt – a vicious cycle that simply has to be broken. So maybe I also meant: «Sorry for having to break this silence».

Under these circumstances, that is, lacking a more suitable subject matter than «hope words» (and missing lively, inspirational academic conversations, like the ones at the first ecolinguistics congress back in 1995 [22]), the first idea that crossed my mind after around ten minutes of silence in my office could well be seen as an apology, among many other explanations, for my shivering and fear. The fear of failing to write about something relevant (relevant things must nowadays be wrapped up in a 'positive', maybe even 'sexy', superficial tone), or of making serious mistakes when trying to do so.

How it is Supposed (not) to Write a Paper

Being fearful is understandable, because after accurately analyzing

my text until now, a few conclusions emerged as undeniable: I have already used the word «I» twelve times until this very full stop. Besides, I made the mistake of writing these first paragraphs in a quite fluent way, as if words (also scientific words) were indeed cherries, like an appealing Portuguese idiom invites us to think. One thing beautiful about everyday language is, in fact, its highly nurturing effect: if we pick up one cherry from the basket, two or more other cherries come along, even unintended, with the first one. That's how dialogues tend to happen, orally, and surely some written texts as well (or at least that's how they used to happen). I fear that silence as a result of competition is robbing us of our daily share of healthy language.

In sum, there are several reasons for me to be fearful about this particular text. In a chapter about the forms of scientific discourse, included in a book addressing language diversity, Harald Weinrich [23] mentioned three things hardly accepted in an academic paper (I added the rule in c)):

a. On the one hand, *the scholar should not use the first person*. Self-referential style may be accused of revealing narcissic traits in the author's personality, academic authorities all around the world seem to emphatically agree on. The fact that I use it really bothers me, because it often means trouble and incomprehension, although deixis is extremely important, complex and ubiquitous in language, as the Odense group in ecolinguistics has been maintaining for a long time [14] and [24]. My use of the first person also has to do with a sense of humility and, to some extent, of helplessness, arising from the fact that as a university professor I have to do science, hopefully in a meaningful way, something which highly depends on the presumption that the idea one wants to transmit *must* be straightforward and clear, as if seen from a very distant place located way above our heads.

Yet, do I have those absolutely straightforward and clear ideas about the topic I chose to deal with in the title? «Words of hope»? No, I sure haven't. And my present context (one in which I try to compensate for the lack of intellectual stimulation at the workplace by using the so-called social networks on the internet) doesn't often help me that much. For example, just when I was deciding where to start this paper, a colleague trying to gain support for a human rights' cause prompted into Facebook with a photo of a dead child (in Syria? In Lybia? In Palestine?) in his/her yelling father's arms, whose head had been literally smashed by a bomb, a horrible view which sadly is becoming too normal in present day media contexts. I stopped writing immediately! Ten more minutes, maybe half an hour, have passed, until I managed to intellectually reconnect with my still very unclear ideas about hope. So, if I use the word «I», it's precisely because I have *one point of view among others*, informed by my own context and labour, maybe not the most credible point of view on the subject but nevertheless, if convincingly explained (though perhaps not in an orthodox way), a valid one. Now, a point of view isn't necessarily a dogma or an absolute truth. It demands an answer. No «I» can really survive without a «you».

b. Secondly, *the scholar shouldn't use metaphors*, at least too many of them, and this was another problem with my paper. Namely, the fact that I have already compared words to cherries. Indeed, there's this idiom in my mother language that words are like cherries, which is beautifully poetic, but also very revealing of the way people naturally communicate at all, in written and in oral form, or of the way ideas tend to spontaneously evolve and spread. After years of reflexive activity as a linguist interested in natural matters, namely in ecology, I came to the conclusion that we shouldn't altogether prevent what I call «natural» speech from developing, and this in academia as well. One problem with

that sort of discourse is: if words are like cherries then metaphors are also like cherries, at least in the mind of artists and writers, so this could be particularly «dangerous». Here and then I happen to enjoy (writing) poetry, something which – rather paradoxically – I have also learned to appreciate in the context of my activity as an ecolinguist. Metaphors, however, can be highly demanding intellectual tools, especially because they often require further dialogue and interpretative discussions. It is thus generally more prudent (and efficient, in the sense that it saves time and patience), but probably not so challenging, to remain denotatively superficial.

c. Thirdly, *the scholar should stick to one «common» language only, namely English*. Yet, as we have seen through the cherries' example, my mother language (Portuguese) keeps peeping through the English words I have to use in order to be understood by a broad international audience, and this could also be problematic if the purpose is clarity. There's no doubt about it: the language used in an academic paper which attempts to be internationally understood should be neutral, direct and overtly descriptive, even if at some points argumentative or explanatory, depending on the subject. And it «should» (meanwhile) be English (that is, not yet Mandarin). Now, the somewhat «different» English I use is to some extent a translation of my thoughts in Portuguese. In spite of the growing tendency towards international homogenization, in Portugal «academic writing is not always clearly distinguishable from literary writing in some subjects (...) It is a highly personal activity deeply bound up with one's own identity and private experience and therefore not susceptible to standardization» [25]. This acute awareness of the mother language behind the lingua franca English will probably only make sense in the context of the defense of language diversity in further chapters.

d. Rule number four: *one shouldn't narrate in an academic paper*, but what have I done till now? I've narrated at least one episode of my day that might explain the difficulty to start writing about ecological issues and hope, especially when related to language, *in academia*. Or at least I have tried to do so, but the result looks more like as if I was telling a story. Well, sorry again, but the «story» itself keeps interrupting me all the time: as a matter of fact, I was writing this last «sorry» when a phone call got mixed up with my discourse. Another facebook friend called me because I had told her on the day before that I would like to help a family in need that she had mentioned in my timeline. A single mother who doesn't have a job, with health problems, and two kids to raise. We talked and talked on the phone, as if we were old friends, and some time later, help did happen.

Just now, after having mentioned this event, I suddenly returned to the beginning of this section of my paper and had what might be called an epiphany: «Why on earth should I be *sorry*? Why should I deny my own speech, style, knowledge, context?», I asked myself. That was the moment when I felt some hope and knew what I wanted to write about.

The Language of Ecology: bad news and «cherries»

What I've done till now was trying to transcribe the process of *mindfulness*, an originally buddist meditation technique, now very popular among psychologists as well, which in Portuguese is translated by the expression *atenção plena* (full attention). It means focussed attention to the slightest details of the present, an attitude that I think can be seen applied to language especially (but not only) in the Odense school of ecolinguistics [14] and [24]. This technique can have a positive impact on the way people perceive their environment and react to it, more calmly and rationally. But I also wrote this text assuming that even in scientific discourse there's some entity behind each sentence,

and more so if these are intended to be sustainable, in the sense of more natural. In a simplified form, I maintain that natural things are mostly good, thus rejecting a frequent prejudice against more natural lifestyles. Not only in the humanities, the cultural tends to be stressed in opposition to the biological / natural.

If there's always an entity behind each sentence, then there's probably a narrative to be articulated. Besides, there's a language in which this narrative comes to life, giving it a particular flavour or nuance (in my case, Portuguese, then translated into English). In a narrative, metaphors do occur, in order for the story to be fluent and well understood, also because it might be the case that for «new» stories the «right» (e.g. more consensual) word isn't yet available. This might have been the case when permaculturalists [26] and [27] innovated with neologisms like *chicken tractor*: the object itself is a small, mobile device designed to provide shelter for chicken but also to be placed on a garden bed in order for these animals to prepare it for planting. In fact, they have in permaculture pretty much the same function as a tractor, except in the fact that their impact on the soil is more sustainable. Scientists themselves, not only children or newcomers, often don't have the needed linguistic resources to name new realities and can't avoid thinking in analogies. In this text I have also chosen a leading metaphor, quite common in Portuguese, *words are cherries*, for two reasons: a) because I intended to point out how dependent people are from engrained patterns of thinking that emerge from the habit of using one's mother language; b) because it is a metaphor that connects language to a positive aspect of nature, something which in my view is common to the whole ecolinguistic movement.

This may sound as though what I did until now was more like literature than like science, but I also tried to fulfill the requisites both of descriptive, structured adequacy and of clarity: scientific texts aren't supposed to be too vague and abstract, and the argumentation should be supported by fruitful examples. Differently from people who are effective both in their ecological achievements and in getting their ideas through by using non-verbal behavior, I often make the «mistake» – see the Portuguese proverbs «silence is gold», or «silence is the soul of business» – of really enjoying words, so the analogy with cherries gives me, and many others like me, a certain hope.

What I have been exposing in a global language like English can be paralleled to what happens within small human communities based on services provided by traditional or organic agriculture, something which, a great deal due to ecolinguistics, I have learned to increasingly depend on. Simply knowing that there's a «who» behind the cherries we eat increases the probability of their being more flavoury and nurturing, for the one who produces them, whom I might even know personally, can more easily be made responsible for their impact on me, the consumer. If the effect is good then it is probable that we engage in a community of communicative / agricultural practices, and a sort of interdependence, based on the satisfaction of important, yet in a globalized economy frequently neglected needs, tends to emerge [13,14,16].

This cannot happen as easily with industrial agriculture, with its highly complex, bureaucratic and distant certification systems. On the other hand – and now returning to language again –, too many stereotyped formulae in «industrialized» language (like the ones occurring in automatic answering systems or even in a certain type of science), along with too many anonymous messages (which are increasing especially, but not only, among young people, particularly in globalized societies involving intense technological dependence, media exposure and peer pressure), can distort the meaning that is to

be conveyed and interpreted, promoting confusion, irresponsibility and even more fear than the one arising from simply daring to use the first person, assuming the other side (the so-called «second person») is not secondary.

Having a point of view brings me to another problem, however: It's not easy for a human being (as opposed to a robot) to get intellectually involved with a certain subject field without getting a bit emotional. Human cognition, as seen from a more natural, biological, ecological or simply psychological point of view, should take into consideration that as human and animal beings simultaneously, we're both rational and emotional in our approaches [28]. I certainly became a bit «too» emotional when analysing the reality I was exposed to through the frequently contradictory lenses of the several languages I had to work with: especially Portuguese and German as a Professor of German Studies, but also English as an environmental activist in my country, because the relevant information came from the natural sciences, which internationally have English as a lingua franca. However, becoming «emotional» (in the positive sense of acquiring «emotional intelligence») may have to do with gaining increasing contact with ecology, and this through ecolinguistics, as some knowledge of the (spider's...) «web of life» [4] makes people expect diversity as the norm, not as the exception.

This seemed problematic and scientifically not sound enough to people from other areas, both in the so-called hard sciences, very dependent on mathematics, and in some of the humanities, where everything «natural» still is seen in opposition to the «real» human. Working in the intersection of environmental issues and language has essentially to do with gaining resilience: it is in fact a relevant, even precious accomplishment for someone to be able to learn how to deal with constant bad news without altogether losing the capacity to promote positive change, a change that brings hope but also involves deep knowledge, acquired by years of close yet silent observation of how natural systems evolve, including the ecosystem of our own body.

This type of knowledge often doesn't conform with societal common sense, so there's some possibility of conflict. Resilience has to do, in my view of ecolinguistics, with surviving the frequent tensions arising from different conceptions and misconceptions on what is a correct / ecological behaviour. Yet, it also has to do with the fact that, particularly if the issues at stake are environmental matters, bad news are really everywhere: environmental conflict situations are widespread on the planet because of fresh water unavailability, high levels of pollution or deforestation, the increasing incidence of so-called «civilizational» health problems (like obesity, diabetes, endocrine disruptions, cancer, all sorts of allergies and mental diseases), irreversible habitat and biodiversity loss, etc. [29]. Ultimately, also poverty itself, gender inequality and war have a lot to do with misconceptions on how human beings relate to the environment, that should and could be reverted through language.

In the section above, «How it is Supposed (not) to Write a Paper», namely in the subsections a) and d), I used a narrative approach to give two examples of bad news, including my reactions to them (I was my own informant), by differentiating the type of discourse involved. There is in fact a difference between

- bad news that, because they're so shocking and painful (yet overwhelmingly frequent on TV or on the internet), simply tend to paralyse the recipient, on the one hand;
- and, on the other hand, bad news that can awaken his/her sense of engagement and hope.

The first bad news (in subsection a)) were delivered distantly through an image and a written post on Facebook about something even more distant (the horrible death of a child by a bomb) and the second bad news case (in subsection d)) was a result of two conversations, in written but also in oral form, about something not so distant (the project of cooperatively helping a single mother in need, who, by the way, was a personal acquaintance of one of the intervenients in the discourse).

The different emotional impact of a very distant and a somewhat more «close» communication brings me nearly to the point where the topic «words of hope» must be addressed in a more orthodox, academic way. The phone call itself made me realize once more, not only how context sensitive language is, even scientific language, but also that the goal I hereby pursue can be accomplished without having to apologize for the fact that as academics we're also human.

People constantly get «interfeared» – and also inspired – by the discourse they're exposed to, so I would for now draw one temporary conclusion from these two episodes: the closer we get to each other through language (for a telephone call is more lively and in this sense «ecological» than a facebook conversation in written form), the better it gets for the feeling I intend to write about: hope. Especially when dealing with environmental matters, to get «close», as the English word correctly seems to imply, also means to be able to close (or protect) ourselves from certain excessively damaging outside stimuli. This is one of the tensions that explain the very existence of language diversity in the world – which I assume to be a desirable resource. But it also in part explains why I was so silent for a couple of years in the now highly internationalized field of ecolinguistics. I had to learn (by doing) what I was supposed to write about, and this is really a huge but often silent task.

On «close» Languages: Revisiting Ecolinguistics

It's not really about me as an individual that I've been writing about, but about language, which always exists in a particular context, so I couldn't help referring in the previous sections to the immediate circumstances of this paper. I'll keep on addressing the topic of language by taking into account observations which have been inspired by ecolinguistics, an area of studies I came across with almost 25 years ago. It was by the year 1990 that I first heard of this emergent tendency in language studies, linking the concern for the environment with attention to language as an object of inquiry. By that time I worked as a linguist, but also showed some interest for environmental matters, despite my fairly limited knowledge of scientific ecological issues. Portugal was experiencing the negative consequences of developing into increasing consumerism, with the subsequent avalanche of e.g. extremely expensive projects to build highly polluting waste treatment plants, generally presented to the public in a very euphemistic and manipulatory way. I promptly decided to read Wilhelm Trampe's «ökologische Linguistik» [9], which included a fair amount of this type of examples of language use. Others had attempted that before, the most renowned being the anglist Alwin Fill, from the university of Graz [30], also author of a first widely read manual of ecolinguistics in the German speaking context [10]. Fill was not only the organizer of the first ecolinguistics congress I went to [22], and of some others which followed and which I attended, he also co-organized the first reader in ecolinguistics [12], together with Peter Mühlhäusler from the university of Adelaide, another major author in the field, especially through his ecolinguistics manual [13], but also through his study of the negative impacts of literacy [31] as a source for language (and thus) knowledge death. It is not my purpose here to explain the

whole history of ecolinguistics, or to relate it to the sociological school around Boaventura de Sousa Santos, who criticizes the north-south power distribution for causing what he calls an *epistemicide* [32]. I will concentrate on a few examples only of things that have been done within this area of studies, and Trampe was the first, to my knowledge at the time, that attempted to link language studies to ecology.

As a former student of Peter Finke [21] from the university of Bielefeld – another scholar I am deeply indebted to, especially after visiting his beautifully wild and diverse garden –, Trampe stressed that people live in so-called «language-world systems» that match words onto realities in the world [9], and proposed that each community lives in a language-world system different from all the others. Besides, he compared the way people use language to the way organisms live in ecosystems, emphasizing the fact that ecosystems are both highly creative and productive. His notion of an ecosystem was thus based on the idea of diversity, a diversity that ideally is a guarantee for quality, creativity and abundance. Transposing this very idea to the realm of language, he claimed that this diversity was under threat, concerning the use people then made of German, and initiated an ecological critique of language, following the emergent tradition in the eighties of the feminist critique of patriarchal modes of speaking.

One of the words he criticized was a technical term of urban planners, *Straßenbegleitgrün*, a German compound meaning ‘the green that is planted along streets’. This example puzzled me, because at first I didn’t understand what the problem was with the word, for it seemed to designate a perfectly desirable state of affairs, especially at a time when in Portugal we were, quite happily in fact, having the first contact with the reality he was so emphatically criticizing. I was looking at his examples from a radically different temporal and local perspective, at a time when the concept *Straßenbegleitgrün* could in Coimbra, my home town, be even called *Straßenbegleitrot*, because the type of vegetation chosen to decorate one of the streets in my neighbourhood was red and not green, something which I interpreted as a sign (even a metonymy) of some sort of aversion against the type of green discourses and policies associated to the German context.

After a first intense phase in the Portuguese construction industry, where it was rare to plant trees or small gardens around buildings, another boom followed where ornamental vegetation was installed along newly built streets. This happened long before the buildings themselves appeared, or were even authorized. Once a new street was built many houses – and business – would follow. These areas, often privately owned by speculators and in this way signaled as a future urban center, were then called by planners, architects and engineers *terrenos expectantes*, «expectant land», because it was assumed that no other uses were possible for this land except construction. Yet, with a bit of creativity, other names (or another meaning) would have been possible for the same physical reality.

In order for me to really understand Trampe’s interpretation of the word I had to grasp that he was criticizing a shallow, «decorative» political ecology, one dealing only with the appearance of ecosystem health, while all sorts of deeper problematic issues concerning the environment seemed to be erased from public discourse or euphemized. The very existence of the street (synonym for unneeded urban spreading) was actually the problem, not the kind of vegetation planted along it. Trampe’s example is today even more pertinent, yet in another way, at a time when the phenomenon of urban gardening [33] is redefining the relations between town and countryside, on the one hand, and turning the link between agricultural and communication systems much more relevant and even urgent, on the other.

For people in the cities to be more aware of the need to protect nature, I’m convinced that they should live much closer to nature, namely to that part of nature which is edible. So why criticize the word, nowadays? There should in fact be vegetation along some streets, but edible vegetation as well, and much less pollution through cars. Transportation should have a minor impact and, if one ecological tendency seems nowadays to be for cities to be able to produce food, then a decentralized rainwater harvesting infrastructure (in order not only to save resources but also to avoid chlorinated water from unnecessarily being spread on edible vegetables), as well as land availability for agriculture near buildings, would have to be equated for the purpose of feeding people as well as plants. This is a huge, and also highly controversial issue, as it involves rethinking the whole urban system. However, an organic, healthy agriculture is no thing to be left to machinery and old people alone. It requires a lot of cooperation and communication [16,26,27,33].

So no wonder several scholars within ecolinguistics deal with the urgent problem of sustainable agriculture in their writings or in their own life. Although this school of Linguistics (maybe even of medicine!) has recently developed into a more descriptive subject field, with strong connections to creole Linguistics (cf. the very productive Brazilian school around Hildo Honório do Couto [18], bearing in its presentation form some useful connection to mainstream linguistics), in fact it has been, from its very beginning (as Trampe’s example above demonstrates and as explicitly stated by the Odense school of ecolinguistics), a prescriptive area of studies, rather than a merely descriptive endeavour.

Prescriptive not in a strictly normative sense, one that forbids scholars from using certain words, but because it suggests and tries to find out new and more ecological ways of thinking through language. It is thus essentially a reflexive activity, both philosophical and scientific, that has as its main concern the relation between language and the environment, or, as we might also put it, the idea of investigating or even designing «sustaining» and «sustainable» language practices (of course, words like *natural*, *sustainable*, *environment* don’t mean exactly the same thing in different languages, or at different times and places [1, 5, 6]).

The fact that ecolinguistics isn’t purely descriptive but also prescriptive, yet in an almost therapeutic sense (and the fact that to a certain extent it is also poetic and narrative) may have consequences on the way a particular scholar writes his/her essays. This I could conclude [4] e.g. after analyzing Adam Makkai’s book chapter «What does a native speaker know about *kill*?», included in [11]), a scientific text on various idiomatic uses of the English verb *to kill*, yet written in the form of a dialogue, pretty much like in ancient philosophy it used to be possible, or as a storyteller would do. Actually, this text was a meta-reflection both on a particular aspect of the English language and on Makkai’s own positioning within academia, for he might have thought of himself, with self-irony, as being that same kind of «poor linguistitian» he describes, arguing rather unsuccessfully with an imaginary representative of the much more powerful and canonical field of comparative literature.

This idea of attempting to change so-called «arbitrary» sign systems like languages (in the saussurean [34], rather static perspective), or of daring to interfere with rigid, long established academic genres, may meet with a certain amount of incomprehension, indeed. After all, who has the power for that? The individuals themselves, communities, the authorities? But which authorities, some would argue, if not *authors*? And how can people change something that is so automatic

and «natural» that they don't really spend time thinking about? Isn't it more useful to change the world itself, instead of just changing the way people name and talk/write about things? I came to the humble conclusion that it is much easier to change my own language than to change the language other people use, and this might explain why it isn't that illogical to risk jumping into the realm of so-called creative or even literary discourse. On the other hand, it seems to me easier to change the language than to change the world, a view that I don't share with other engaged environmentalists.

I hope it is getting clear that the first part of this paper's title – «sorry for bothering» – displays my present (rather ironical) reaction to a frequent skeptical attitude towards this «strange» area of studies. In fact, it was not rare for me to experience that ecolinguistics was either completely ignored, or seen as a marginal, eclectic and unscientific tendency within linguistics. I frequently had the impression that the element «eco» in the label, establishing a connection to ecological matters, and especially the ecocritical / political stance it frequently took, was completely irrelevant, or rather unintelligible, to my colleagues in linguistics and beyond. A few years later, I would notice that some topics which I had seen for the first time being addressed within ecolinguistics turned out to be fashionable, yet with different labels, within other fields not only of the humanities (e.g. in political science). The ways in which some discussions took place in the ecolinguistics group of the first phase were quite different from those I witnessed in mainstream linguistics or in my other research field, German studies.

One thing that struck me at a congress back in 1995 [22], and which in fact now led me to write this essay in this way, was the great variety of academic styles I came across with, a symptom that the idea of language diversity was not only central for this area of studies, but it also was intended to be applied. For instance, one of the participants rather provocatively stated at the beginning of his presentation that he was a marxist buddhist. Establishing a direct connection between one's academic work and one's ideology or spiritual positioning was by then, and even today, quite rare in science. Another one suddenly gave up a rather orthodox presentation and started to read a poem of his authorship, in English. From another colleague's work and personal experience I learned for the first time about the word *permaculture*, and his oral description of this now very fashionable movement in architecture or psychology, associating natural/organic agriculture with some special building and design principles, is still the one I keep using myself: «high information, low labour» (Peter Mühlhäusler). Why bother to work so hard changing nature and deeply interfering with it, as it always has been the case in human history, if it can, unchanged in its essence, work quite efficiently on behalf of human communities? That was the principle, and I've also tried to apply it to my way of doing linguistics (e.g. by rediscovering how nourishing good poetry can be: «high in meaning, low in words»).

Mentioning my writing «mistakes» in the first section helped me revive my own experimenting, all over the years, with an approach that no doubt brought me into a more empathic, tolerant and creative view of the subject matter «language» than I used to have before. This is indeed a holistic approach, which on the other hand at times significantly contributed to isolate me from important members of my human environment. A more vivid awareness of ecological matters through language frequently involved changing, sometimes in a radical way, my own habits and culture [35], and maybe I often committed the mistake of trying to persuade other people to do the same, something for which language skills alone aren't enough.

Although I didn't manage to be completely coherent with the

ecological ideas I was trying to put into practice, many of them utopian in a country like mine, particularly in times like those I have described in the first section, the intellectual and material enrichment (for living more sustainably also means saving money) gained from the experiment was for sure not negligible, in spite of the fact that some of these ideas, now increasingly popular (producing one's own food, solar water heating, saving energy through solar cooking, etc.), still are, at this very moment, strangely new to the majority of my friends, colleagues, relatives. I must recognize that their skeptic reactions very often made me learn as well, namely that for change really to happen in a meaningful way, government must do its part. And this requires political and administrative skills, not only language and environmental expertise.

No Hope for (self-)Sufficiency in Isolation

When I used the verb form *isolated* above, I didn't mean it in a purely negative sense, but I recognize that the concept is complex. From a strict ecological point of view isolated islands have often proved to be very rich in linguistic and biological diversity [31, 36]. Now (again establishing a parallel to language), I also know from experience that in order for this very text to get written I had to force myself into a period of relative reclusion. Some creativity often emerges out of silence (and some silence in nature can be very inspiring). Or at least it emerges out of some sort of scarcity, that is, an absence of too much external input or stimulation and even, to an outsider at least, out of a maybe somewhat irritating self-sufficiency (even though some stimuli must always be there, in the very moment someone decides to look around and write, so that's why I previously mentioned the activity of trying to translate the concept of *mindfulness* into words).

Returning to the word «isolation» (and I don't intend to avoid the brackets, because it may only be apparent), I would now like to relate it to the idea of «closeness» through language, that has been discussed before. A «close» language is, in my view, the one of a small group of people who, during a certain period, more or less long, get to know each other reasonably well. In this sense, it is not necessarily a language of isolated people but exactly the contrary of this notion. However, most people now live in massified societies, where individuals are pretty «autonomous» (maybe a euphemism for lonely). In fact, the divorce rate tends to increase, a great number of people live as singles and families with only one child are becoming the norm, so no wonder computers tend to compensate for the rather frequent lack of real human proximity, even in big agglomerations like cities. People live isolated, but with massified consumption habits, and in this sense maybe «as equal», yet out of fear many only tend to relate with similar people. It is getting hard for many frightened citizens to believe that «different» people are not necessarily a danger.

In Mühlhäusler's «Babel revisited», language diversity is presented as an important cognitive resource [36]: the so-called «western world» has a lot to learn, he says, from languages spoken in «isolated», rural communities, something which contradicts a widespread common sense. As the author suggests, people in distant villages from Melanesia used to strongly differentiate themselves from other cultures by identifying with the language of one's village, yet at the same time it was for them a natural thing to be multilingual, as a way of communicating with people in other villages. This created a net of identity-based reciprocal relationships that could be more important for survival than the existence of a single language, usually more prone to the imperialistic imposition of one culture only and the destruction of all the others.

Mühlhäusler proves with a considerable amount of examples that the biblical idea of a common language as a tool for success (by extrapolation: of a perfectly homogenous society), and of diversity as a necessary cause for confusion and lack of understanding must be reanalyzed. Small communities should be allowed to keep their languages, not only because of the identity factor, but also because some knowledge engrained into these languages can even be wiser than the one in the highly technological, globalized world most people nowadays live in: for instance to interpret verbs like *to cure* and *to teach* as demanding a comitative case, like in some small languages of this region, that is, viewing these processes as cooperative-experiential (= doing something with somebody else) and not as agent-based and causative (= cause to heal; = cause to learn), would be highly desirable. This is meanwhile beginning to be done in our modern world, as many patients and students have understood that they themselves play an important role in the cure/learning process, even up to the point where more learning and cure can be found out of the established, authoritative, official system than within it. But in order for them to experience this, they have to relearn how to live in small, nearly «isolated» communities, closer to nature and, at least for some periods, almost entirely closed to external yet noxious influences like for instance TV advertising.

Furthermore, what I also meant by the word «isolation» is the fact that acquiring knowledge about (political and also scientific) ecology implies, to a large extent, learning to be autonomous or self-sufficient in many other respects. Firstly, as a form of intellectual independence from mainstream manipulation and cultural imperialism, of course. Secondly, however, but not less importantly, in relation to the daily amount of water and electricity used, the type and quantity of waste produced, the type and quantity of resources involved in daily consumption habits, and also, but not less relevant, the amount of money spent for all this, in case people actually (still) spend money (in «outsider» communities the abolition of money has been attempted, together with the introduction of small, alternative currencies).

However, just trying to live in this «simple» way can be hard work, for it connects the citizen / scholar to a whole range of other scientific or technical fields, from engineering to agriculture, from political science to a vast number of natural sciences. And it can also be expensive, if the «right» knowledge is not yet available in an affordable way at a particular place: as we know, scale economies are important to keep prices down. So photovoltaic electricity, for instance, is still too expensive in my country, despite the reasonably high availability of sunlight. However, this whole technical knowledge, based on highly specialized vocabularies, particularly if it depends to a large extent on the availability of a high proficiency in foreign languages, can also disconnect the citizen / scholar from the «real» world, the one of the so-called «business as usual» these many fields actually live by in his/her own community.

To some extent, this happened to me. What I was «seeing», as a German Studies professor, with the words I knew from regularly reading the German language (in fact in some respects this was an effective tool for acquiring a higher level of ecological self-sufficiency), was not always exactly what people in my country were «seeing» in Portuguese. It must also be recognized that many of these «alternative» ideas of an increasing autonomy and self-sufficiency are now entering the world of bigger corporations or public institutions like hospitals and universities, as is required by their own survival strategies in a global, often unpredictable market. After all, ecological sustainability, correctly understood, can very much contribute to save money, and even the worst polluter needs to keep on having profit.

In spite of this evolution, at the beginning (and even more recently, as the economic crisis determined a high level of unemployment), not few people in westernized societies have been led by scientific and political ecological discourse(s) – for there are many different ones, as we can conclude from what is being exposed – to leave the city in order to live supposedly in a more sustainable manner, producing their own electricity and food, harvesting rainwater and so on, in rural or peri-urban areas, where the normal infrastructure isn't available and where they would for sure be dependent on the automobile because public transportation systems are (almost) inexistent. Another kind of negative isolation, because it causes vulnerability, may thus be the consequence of these options, so the idea of associating sustainability with language can be fruitful for a more correct and up-to-date (re) evaluation of ecology, as depending much more than is nowadays the case on close personal interactions.

In my view, and in spite attempts to bring agriculture into the cities [33], in order for instance to prevent crime (as unemployed people would have an occupation), it is highly desirable to inspire people to return to rural areas, now turned into perfect deserts. In Portugal, moreover, they are often occupied by eucalyptus monocultures, due to the fact that the remaining old people don't want or cannot do agriculture anymore, and rent their land to the paper industry. But how ecological can that return to the countryside be, if urban centers are decaying from lack of residents, and (above all to ecolinguists), how sustainably can that option be communicated? On the other hand, the experience acquired by those who have at least tried this kind of change in their lives is not to be considered irrelevant by mainstream science, so these until now fairly discreet and isolated experiences should be more effectively researched. I'm particularly referring to many people from different countries and generations who have been applying permacultural and «ecovillage» design for the last 30 years in many places of the world, and also in Portugal, for instance in the project known as Tamera [37].

Something which I have tried to do myself, but not yet in a totally successful way. From my experience, and because the essence of ecology relies in the idea of «interaction», it really demands a group of engaged people – a sort of village – to work well, and that isn't necessarily possible if it has to be articulated with an extremely busy family and professional life. How language can actually change that is still, and will be permanently, both a mystery and a challenge to me.

Concluding Remarks and Acknowledgements

Writing about language should imply a fair amount of observational skills that tend to be confused with general, off-topic, non-scientific narration. Of course one could treat the topic I've been dealing with, «words of hope», in a completely different way, for instance using the methods of discourse analysis. That would mean working in a more distanced and focussed, supposedly objective way, by analyzing only previously taped and transcribed conversations, under strict methodological circumstances (e.g. choosing only conversations having to do with a specific topic, normally a grammatical or lexical detail, or implying a specific, well controlled context). Only after doing that in a significant amount of cases would I be allowed to jump into conclusions based on safe generalizations. Especially younger generations are more cautious than I was in this paper.

The way I chose to refer to the interactions mentioned in section 1 and 2, and also the way I dealt with the examples I gave in further sections, can be accused of being impressionistic and subjective, but I claim that a certain amount of risk is worthwhile in a text not

exclusively dealing with that sort of linguistic detail analysis. The examples of linguistic interactions I picked up above function merely as a metonymy of a much broader universe of similar «conversations» – those that I'm quite sure many of the readers engage in everyday. I thus consider them symbolic, both in the sense that they stand for something else, something much broader than the examples themselves, and also in the sense that they are not to be taken as excessively relevant for the topic under scrutiny, for my purpose was not to exclusively discuss language issues.

The brackets I've just used with the word «conversations» are also meaningful: they imply the notion that many of these short-term relations and interactions, especially through Facebook, but also (and I dare say increasingly) transposed into face-to-face communication practices – as in the highly superficial «que remédio» dialogue above (introduction) –, are not really satisfactory, at least to people of my generation, who in their youth had the privilege of quite regularly experiencing long, profound, focussed and undisturbed discussions or conversations, something which greatly enhanced my speech capacity. Differently from our sons and daughters, we also used to read and write long letters to each other, on paper. In a context of extremely high electronic mediation and economic acceleration, as the one that nowadays can be experienced not only in academia, a sense of deepness is increasingly absent from daily communicative life, so it might be useful not only to scientifically diagnose the problem, but also to try to understand its causes and if possible solve it – in case it is really found to be a problem. Maybe this could be a topic for further work.

In several parts of this paper it has hopefully become clear that it is possible to combine with linguistic modes of thinking knowledge forms acquired by experimenting in the several practical fields of environmental issues. I therefore used a mixture of strategies in a somewhat hybrid language. It was my purpose to show in what ways ecolinguistics influenced my academic work, and although there would be a lot more to be said, I managed to do it both by telling how it shaped my way of writing and, by more than once articulating the tension between town and countryside, how it also changed my way of living.

As for the «words of hope» in the title, they are implicit in my acknowledgements. I wrote this text in a state of almost reclusion, mostly at home, but near nature. I simultaneously used the opportunity to (temporarily) detox from foods that in large quantities are not only problematic for our health but also for the health of the planet, due to their huge ecological footprint. While writing this text I practically didn't eat meat, fish, eggs or dairy products and almost only ate whole, organic grains, nuts, fresh vegetables and fruits, very frequently raw. I thus thank nature, myself, ecolinguistics, my family, who supported me, and my university, for believing in me, because: I feel much better now!

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