

## **Ecological discourse in public debates**

This dissertation analyses ecological discourse in Polish public debates at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Designed as its linguistic monograph, the thesis is based on the assumption – close to Halliday’s views and widely accepted in ecolinguistics since the early 90s of the last century – that the language in communication is not just a social phenomenon but also an ecological one, that is because it is inseparably connected with social reality, the way it is used can affect people’s attitudes (as language trustees) to the natural environment, its social structure and consumption. In this sense, the ecological discourse is a linguistic problem, which should be analysed not just because of the direction of impact which Michael Halliday emphasised (from the language to the world), but also because of the opposite one (from the world to the language).

The thesis attempts to analyse how the ecological discourse manifests itself in public debates. It also discusses the mechanisms of its absorption and the impact of the absorption on public debates. The thesis adopts a broad definition of ecological discourse, understood as any talks about ecology in which the social representation of the natural world is created publically and the relation of man to the environment and its problems is determined. The observation of “the green public sphere”, or the discussion distinguished by pluralism of views on environmental issues, makes it possible to capture the dynamics of ecological discourse in contact with other discourses. Indeed, ecological contents circulate in public debates, both in the space where they cross the boundaries of other discourses, and in time, being repeated in different consituational configurations, and that process shapes the way of speaking and thinking about the world of nature and environmental problems.

The book consists of three parts. Part one describes major current studies on ecological discourses in Europe and worldwide, with particular emphasis on the achievements of ecolinguistics in its critical mainstream called linguistic

ecology. They constitute an important inspiration for the observation of Polish debates on ecology, which has a form of an ecocritical discourse analysis.

Part two and three contains the analysis of ecological discourse, which starts with issues related to naming and expressing environmental matters, goes through the presentation of metaphors that shapes thinking and talking about the environment, and finally presents scenarios of environmental communication and discursive practices (strategies, rules) that decide about the method of framing these contents. These issues are presented in the circulation dynamics of the discourse.

Problems of compositional semantics of terminology in ecology are presented as the effect of the circulation of productive affixes in this field in the public debate. The separation of well-established in ecology terms from the entire cognitive-interpretive system, from the “environment” in which they arise, often causes an explosion of meanings (eg composites which contain *eco-* and *bio-* segments). This results in problems with the communicability of ecological contents, which – although expressed with the desire for precision characteristic of the language of science – sound strange, which is determined by the tendency to terminology internationalization. They are not easy to learn for a regular participants of the public debate, who are limited by their own experience and common sense-oriented in their perception of the world.

The circulation of ecological terms makes it possible to follow inter-discourse contacts of ecological discourse. It is distinctly linked with economic, educational and legal discourses, and the impact of socio-political terminology on the way environmental problems are presented gives the impression of similarity between the organization of the lives of plants and animals in ecosystems and the functioning of the state. In addition, many concepts of nature protection (including the term *ecology*) enter an area of consumptive mass culture, finding a new frame of reference to the daily routine of a one-dimensional individual – the consumer – and undergoing total antropocentralsation.

Observation of the trajectory of flagship words (*megawords*), namely those that have particular emotive and connotative values in ecological discourses, reveals the processes of their discourse semantisation, i.e. negotiation, manipulation, various transformations of meaning as a result of which they acquire a peculiar semantic surplus. This surplus relates a word to social reality and allows the identification of participants in the debate on ecology and general orientation in ecological discourse. The intensity of the circulation of flagship words emphasizes the growing social importance of the issues related to ecol-

ogy. It reflects not only the temperature of the dispute, but mainly pluralism of public debates in relation to these issues. Flagship words in ecological discourse represent both the values and anti-values causing different emotions, depending on who uses them, in which function and with what intention (e.g. the word *green* which on the one hand expresses values such as health, nature, sensitivity to the good of nature, but on the other hand anti-values – particularism, fanaticism).

Undoubtedly, 2007 was a breakthrough year in Poland in this respect, due to the Rospuda case, the widely commented conflict between the environmental defenders of the Rospuda river valley and the inhabitants of the region, who wanted to have a motorway built in this place. In the course of the debate *the Rospuda* became the hypernym of all the places of conflict between the needs (and rights) of the natural environment and the development of civilization, the indexical signal that positioned the discursive community of ecologists in counterpoint to the majority community, a symbol of struggle for the preservation of nature, even against human interests. In this sense, the discussion about the Rospuda helped to highlight the importance of environmental issues as a thread closely connected with man and his social reality, to overcome anthropocentric dichotomy in the perception of issues related to nature in the eternal “us and the rest of the world” order of things. The conflict between environmental protectors and supporters of the road infrastructure in a protected area, called Poland’s first “eco-civil war”, also led to the loss of “ecological innocence” in debates. It involves an unreflective perception of the relationship between man and nature as a natural one that has always existed and thus subject to no changes. The defence of the Rospuda valley violated everyday common sense knowledge and moved debates on ecology to another level – from the level of “obviousness” to the level of “pseudo-obviousness”, which is used by its participants in a more conscious, detached and often cynical way.

The result of the circulation of ecological contents in public debates is the uniformity and stereotypicality in their presentation. Take metaphoric modelling as an example. In speaking about ecology generally three main areas of mental projections are updated: ECOLOGY IS WAR, ECOLOGY IS ECONOMY, ECOLOGY IS RELIGION. The expansiveness of source domains rooted in everyday communication results in colonization of ecological discourse by imposing on it other conceptual frameworks, the commonness of which causes a widespread lack of alternatives in imaging and interpreting reality.

While the analysis of the lexical layer of ecological discourse emphasises

the ideative dimension of communication process, the way of notion understanding and perceiving, as well as production and transformation of their representations, the analysis of communicative scenarios of informing, illustrating and promoting, highlighted in the third part of the book, focuses on examining cultural-communication patterns and their discursive practices, which help to organise and merge with the knowledge of environmental issues. Capturing them in the circulation dynamics: from the centre to the periphery of the debate makes it possible to discover a place of ecological discourse in the public area. It is determined by the way discursive strategies are implemented (personalization, antagonistic attitude, objectification – subjectivization, prioritizing) and their impact on the image of environmentalists and environmental discourses.

For example, the hegemonic perspective in the scenario of informing highlights their foreignness and particularism, forcing all the events connected with environmental protection into the area of controversy (discourse relativisation rule), or even deviance (discourse excommunication rule). The unit perspective in the imaging scenario results in non-standard, polemic and provocative approaches, but – by removing the normative cognitive corset – it requires from the participants of the debate on the ecology of criticism to be open to new interpretations and ready to verify own attitudes.

While approaches that are objectivising, standardizing and putting reality in order in line with the social context may lead to the mirage of consensus (oppressive to minority discourses), the unit perspective can lead to the cognitive chaos. On the surface, the stereoscopic perspective in the promotion scenario seems to reconcile the other two. It makes it possible to present environmental problems in a non-unified way, but on the other hand it highlights their importance as primary, the most urgent to solve in human life and well functioning society, adding some propaganda to ecological discourse.

Interpretations and evaluations, made in the course of the analysis, are based on the criterion of environmental adequacy, which aims at drawing attention to the correctness and communicativeness of expressing ecological contents, and at promoting the coexistence of the language users with the natural world through an appropriate use of language. This makes the book helpful in increasing ecological awareness and shaping environmental attitudes in society. Above all, however, its goal is to fill a gap in Polish humanistic sciences with the opinion of the linguist on contemporary debates about the environment.

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