



Language Ecology

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What is it?

Language ecology studies the dynamics of interaction and coexistence of old and new languages in social contexts. As society becomes increasingly more mobile, dominant languages take the place of lesser known or indigenous languages. A language ecology perspective follows the metaphor of an ecosystem, with a balance ensuring survival of all species. In the case of languages, a language ecology approach analyzes power dynamics and issues of equity and human rights as fundamental elements in the social use of languages. The goal is to ensure that the promotion of any one language, in the name of globalization for example, does not make casualties of historically important local languages. Instead, these can become empowered as the result of increased social interactions with a larger world.

Who uses the concept?

Language ecology is used in the field of language learning and teaching, where scholars from linguistics, applied linguistics, World Englishes, and literacy use the concept to develop frameworks for the promotion and protection of local and indigenous languages. Language ecology supports critical views about bilingualism and multilingualism, language policy (especially in developing countries), and language education, particularly vis-à-vis the role of English in today's world.

Fit with intercultural dialogue?

One could argue that infusing language learning and teaching with a language ecology perspective is intercultural dialogue. It is important, in order to use languages as a tool for intercultural dialogue, to

infuse their practice within a language ecology perspective that counters subtractive bilingualism and linguistic discrimination, two elements that undermine dialogue as they situate languages in unfair power imbalances.

What work remains?

Language ecology continues to gain traction in light of debates about language imperialism and linguistic human rights. It has inspired scholars to debate the validity of current frameworks to define language (such as the second/foreign language binary) and propose more inclusive ideas such as additional languages, second languages or languages in contact. In a world where globalization and social mobility will be the norm rather than the exception, the call for stronger language ecology frameworks is the key for the survival of many languages. There is a need for interdisciplinary research and advocacy to ensure that any future language policies and curricular initiatives remain loyal to the views of diversity and coexistence at the heart of language ecology.

Resources

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- Phillipson, R. & Skutnabb-Kangas, T. (1996). English Only worldwide or language ecology? *TESOL Quarterly*, 30(3), 429-452.
- Skutnabb-Kangas, T., & Phillipson, R. (2008). A human rights perspective on language ecology. *Encyclopedia of Language and Education*, 9, 3-14.