Language and the Environment

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ABSTRACT

Language affects the way we view the world. As we humans strive to undo the destruction we daily deliver on the environment, we must consider the role that language plays in shaping our views of the environment. This article explores the link between language and the environment, looking at the specific case of English. Both lexical and grammatical features of English are considered. Numerous examples and cartoons illustrate the concepts discussed.

The final section of the article addresses implications for language instruction. The authors urge language teachers to include environmental themes in their classes, stating that such themes add to, rather than detract from, language learning. A sample lesson is provided which aims to increase learners' understanding of the language-environment connection.

INTRODUCTION

Today, there is an increasing awareness that language influences the way we think about our social and natural world and the way we behave socially and environmentally. Bilingual speakers of English and of many Asian languages will realise, for example, that the way relatives are categorized in their native (mother tongue) languages — Thai, Tamil, Malay, Chinese languages, etc. — is radically different from the way they are categorized in English. There is no exact equivalent for the meanings "brother" and "sister" in many Asian languages; seniority is a more important factor than in English. Thus, seniority has to be taken into account when we use, for example, Mandarin to refer to siblings, and as a result, our view of relationships changes.

This language difference is not just a difference of words. Rather, the difference between elder brother/sister and younger brother/sister affects our behaviour: the rights and obligations of an elder sibling in relation to a younger one will differ from those of a younger sibling in relation

to an elder one. Examples like this demonstrate that different languages cut up the world in different ways, and so construct different ways of thinking, perceiving, and acting. Language is not some neutral, transparent medium through which we view the world.

It was in a similar fashion that feminists became aware of the ways in which the English language produces and reproduces sexist thought patterns in its users (Sunderland 1992). Based on this awareness, feminists and others have made efforts to change language use to bring about less

Cartoon 1

What a shame! So much unused vacant land! Nothing but concrete.
Not a tree, a worm, or a nest in sight.
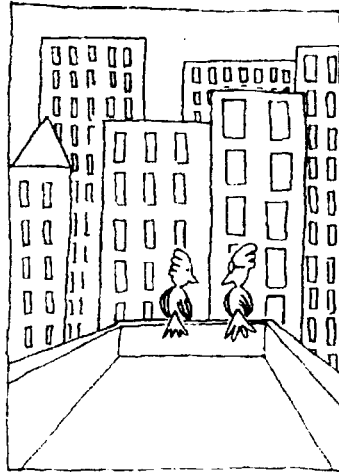
Even within the same language there are different ways of referring to the same phenomenon which view it in a different way. For example, a witness to a road accident might describe the "same" accident in different ways:

(1) The bicycle collided with the bus.

(2) The bus ran into the bicycle.

(3) The bus and the bicycle were involved in a collision.

Sentence (1) seems to attribute the cause of the accident to the bicycle, sentence (2) seems to attribute it to the bus, and (3) seems neutral. If the witness uses (2) as a description, responsibility and therefore eventual criminal charges are more likely to be brought against the bus driver.

It is important, then, for our students to realise that language is a structuring device through which we understand the world, and which indirectly, but powerfully, affects our actions. It follows that any attempt to bring about changes of attitude and action toward the environment needs to go hand-in-hand with examination of and changes in the ways we use language to talk and write about the environment.

sexist attitudes. For example, today many people no longer use "he" "him" and "his" to refer to all people. Thus, instead of "Every student should write his composition on both sides of the paper" many people now write "All students should write their compositions on both sides of the paper."

This article is about the kinds of language use which are environmentally hostile, about the kinds of more environmentally friendly forms of language, and about our role as language teachers. Although all the examples in the article are taken from English, no doubt similar issues arise in other languages.

VOCABULARY

There are many facets to the relationship between language and the environment. In this article, we will focus on two: vocabulary and grammar. Vocabulary concerns the words we choose. We need to examine our choices carefully. For example, to describe parts of nature which are not being used by humans, we use terms such as "vacant land" [Cartoon #1] and "untapped resources." This reflects a view that nature is something passive which needs intervention by humans to shape it

into something useful. In this view, if nature is not being put to human use, it is blank and wasted.

beasts," "pests" [Cartoon #3], and "weeds." This reflects a view that if nature isn't serving humans,

Cartoon 2
Conquering Nature: A hollow victory.
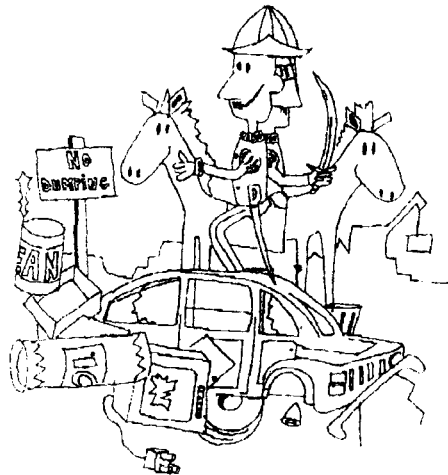
From a more environmentally friendly perspective, nature has value in its own right. Nature is active and flourishing on its own, without human intervention. There are limits to the extent to which humans can, should, or would want to control or "conquer" [Cartoon #2] nature. For example, nature reserves are being set up where people are not allowed or have restricted access.

Similarly, things in nature that we don't want, such as flies and crab grass, are called "savage

it should be wiped out. Again, fortunately we are seeing changes as areas are set up where animals and plants that don't coexist well with humans, such as tigers, can live without fear of extinction.

Another way that vocabulary shapes our views of the environment is in the value we place on words. Some words are valued positively, while others have a negative value. Let's look, for instance, at the two words "big" and "small." Generally speaking, in present-day society "big"

Cartoon 3
One bird says to another: "These people are really pests!
And their artificial plants are nothing but weeds."

is good, and "small" is bad. A big car is more prestigious than a small car [Cartoon #4]. A big house is more desirable than a small flat. Yet, doesn't this "big is beautiful" infatuation increase our destruction of nature [Cartoon #5]?

There are many other examples of the way society values certain words over others, with negative consequences for the environment. For

phors. Basically a metaphor occurs when a thing or process is referred to as if it were something else. We might think that metaphor is confined to poetry, but in fact much of our everyday language involves metaphors of which we are unaware. For example, every time we talk about the mouth of a river, the foot of a mountain, the bowels of the earth, we are talking of aspects of the natural landscape as if it was a human being.

Cartoon 4

A: Isn't my big car beautiful?
B: What about the big amount of oil and gasoline it uses and the big amount of pollution it causes?
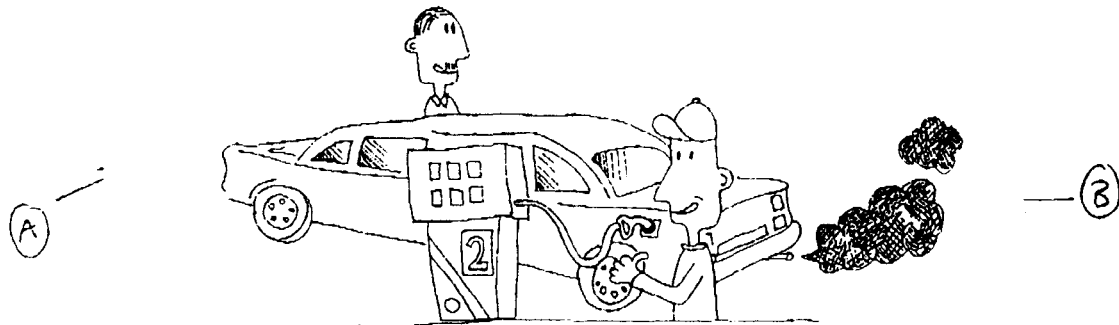
instance, "more" is better than "less" (so the more air conditioned a restaurant is, the greater its status), "modern" is better than "traditional" (so we have replaced traditional housing which used natural means of cooling and built modern housing which traps hot air inside), and "fast" is better than "slow" (so drive your car rather than walk or take public transport) [Cartoon #6].

The final aspect of vocabulary use that we wish to touch on in this article concerns meta-

If we could become more aware of these metaphors, we might, as a result, begin to treat the earth with the kind of respect and concern we give human beings. In particular, we could consciously use metaphors which emphasize harmful impacts on the environment, e.g., *scars gashes* on the landscape, the *rape* of the countryside.

We can at the same time, of course, use more explicit metaphors, such as: *tropical rainforests are the lungs of the earth; rivers are the blood*

Cartoon 5

A: The bad news is that it's another terrible oil spill.
B: But the good news is that because this oil spill is so big, we're sure to get in the Guiness book of World Records
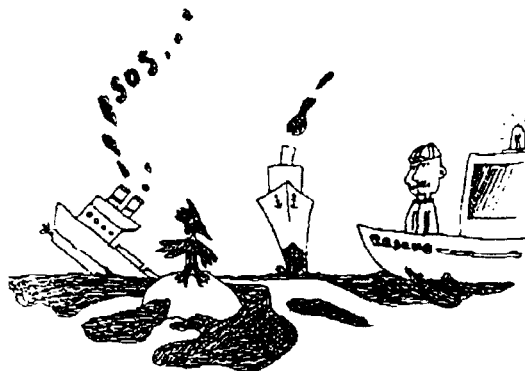
supply of living-systems; or, to quote noted environmentalist James Lovelock (1986: 28):

> *Would we mine our livers for nutrients?*
>
> *Would we raze our hair and plant our scalps with tomatoes?*

GRAMMAR

In addition to the words we use to speak about the environment, our views can also be reflected and shaped by the word forms and word orders we use. In other words, grammar also needs to be examined when we look at language about the environment. Such a grammatical analysis reveals several tricks up the speakers/writers' sleeves.

One grammatical device that writers use is the transitive-intransitive distinction. As you know, transitive verbs show a relationship between the subject which did something and the object which had that something done to it. On the other hand, intransitive verbs do not reveal who or what caused that something which is being discussed.

To illustrate, let's look at two real examples of writing about the ozone layer. One is by an industry group and the other by an environmental group. Can you guess which is which?

> Example 1: Damage to the ozone layer will increase cases of skin cancer.

> Example 2: ... cases of non-malignant skin cancer have been increasing over many years.

In Example 1 the cause of the increase in cases of skin cancer is stated. In this way, the process is emphasized. In Example 2 the end product is emphasized. No cause of this end product is stated, thus, one might take the increase as self-caused or inevitable with no one to blame. As you probably guessed, Example 1 is from the environmental group and 2 from the industry group. Of course, the environmental group could go further and discuss the causes of damage to the ozone layer. Cartoon #7 gives another illustration of the use of the transitive and intransitive.

This brings us to another grammar technique for highlighting or, conversely, downplaying processes. Writing by people who wish to present situations as facts -- normal, everyday facts -- not as processes, use nouns and noun phrases instead of active verbs. For instance, in a piece in defense of hunters killing seals for their fur, the authors chose noun phrases such as sealing operation and killing techniques. Sealing and killing modify the nouns operation and techniques (very neutral, scientific, abstract terms). In contrast, people against killing seals present the act directly:

operation to kill seals

techniques for killing seals

Similarly, the writers of the piece in defence of the hunters chose the noun form rather than the verb form. This is seen in the slaughter of animals and the seal hunt. Compare this with the following:

Cartoon 6

A: I love convenience food. It's so fast and easy.
B: Yes, and it's incredible how fast and easily convenience food creates a pile of rubbish.

A   B
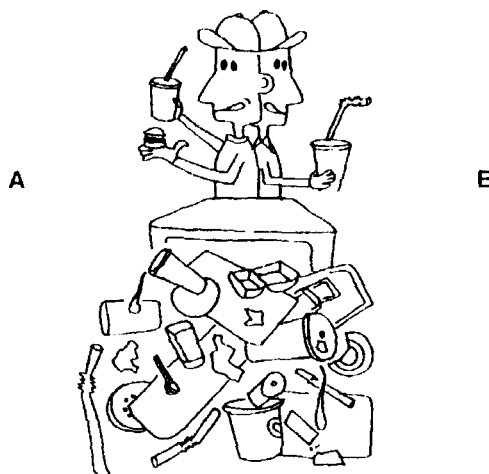
The hunters slaughter the animals.

The people hunt the seals.

You will probably recall the grammar-book definition of a noun as a person, place, or thing, whereas verbs were defined as actions. By putting things in the noun form, writers are presenting us with a view which emphasizes the status quo, the fixed, rather than the fluid. They may be telling us there is nothing we can do about the situation being described. Further, when the noun form is used, those responsible for the killing do not have to be mentioned. On the other hand, verbs may give us hope for change. They may be presenting us with an opening. Humans caused this; humans can do something about it.

Another way, besides the use of verbs, of inviting the readers' participation is the use of the first person. This personalizes situations. On the other hand, the third person is often used to give writing a scientific, objective, fixed flavour. Writers may use first person plural as a way to call readers to action to change the status quo, as in this selection from a piece urging Australians to act to stop people from killing kangaroos:

> We may not be able to cost out [estimate the price of] our feeling for our fellow-creatures [kangaroos] or the value we place on their wildness and freedom in statistics or export dollars. But we have it.... What men and women would we be if we did not care for the lives and suffering of our fellow creatures?
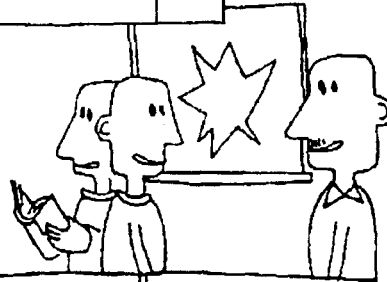
One word of caution: We have pointed out techniques which writers use. However, every technique has varied purposes. Thus, the presence of, for example, the intransitive does not neces-
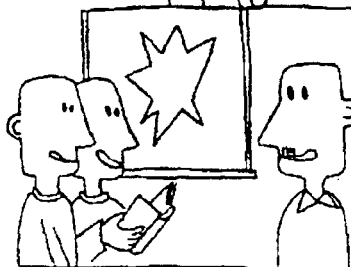
Cartoon 7
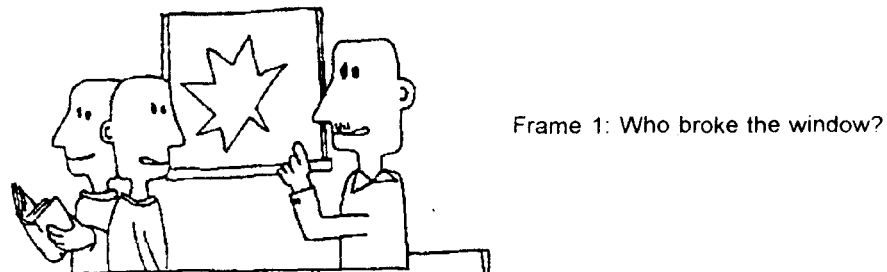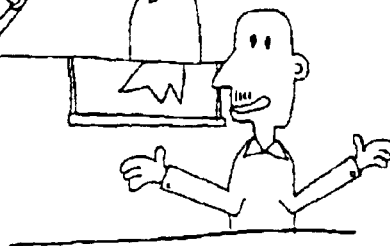

Frame 1: Who broke the window?

Frame 2: The window has broken?

Frame 3: A glass realignment procedure has taken place?

Frame 4: This is the thanks I get for teaching them grammar?

sarily mean that the speaker/writer is supporting seal hunting or other practices which most environmentalists would oppose. Language use is not so simple.

For instance, if we take another look at the transitive construction, we will see that it is an oversimplification to say "transitive is good: intransitive is bad." One problem with the transitive verb construction is that it suggests processes are only one-way: usually from a human agent that causes the process to a passive object that is affected by it. This is a way of thinking that is intrinsically hostile to the environment, because it encourages us to believe that human agents can dominate the natural world around them without that natural world affecting humans in return.

Also, this construction fosters the idea that the environment is passive and powerless. But we know that this notion of a passive environment is false. If mistreated, nature will take its revenge on us humans. For example, because of our depletion of the ozone and pollution of the air, nature will afflict us with diseases such as skin cancer and asthma; because of our destruction of forests, its floods could drown us; and because of our erosion and scarring of the earth, its landslides may make our apartment buildings collapse over on our heads [Cartoon #8].

Based on this idea of nature as active, one strategy we could apply in our language is, where possible, to put nature in the agent position in active sentences. For instance, instead of saying *We pick oranges from trees*, we could say *Trees provide us with oranges* [Cartoon #9]. This alternative, which is found in the language of many traditional societies, recognizes the power of nature and helps us to conceive it as an equal partner, not as an object to dominate.

IMPLICATIONS FOR LANGUAGE TEACHING

Language teachers around the world are joining with their students and others to try to protect the environment. For example, more and more language teaching materials, in Asia and elsewhere, integrate the environment (e.g., Curriculum Development Institute of Singapore 1992; Nakabachi 1992; Stempleski 1992). Including the environment in our teaching does not mean that we stop being language teachers. Instead, we can easily include environmental content in part of our language instruction in ways which will make language class more interesting and meaningful for students (Brown 1991; Cates 1990; Jacobs 1993).
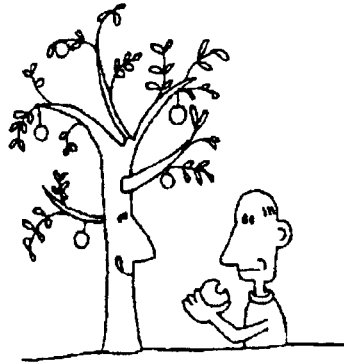
Cartoon 8

A: Poor Nature. Humans do terrible things to it.
B: Yes, and poor humans. Nature is doing terrible things back.

Cartoon 9

Don't forget to thank me for the orange by letting me have clean air and water
and by not feeding me artificial fertilizer and spraying me with pesticides

We language teachers can use many means to integrate ideas on environmental issues into our instruction. These include students:

1. reading and listening to texts on the environment

2. doing role plays about environmental issues

3. interviewing each other about their behaviour concerning the environment

4. investigating environment concerns in the areas where they live

5. writing letters about environmental issues to corporations, international bodies, etc.

6. converting tables, graphs, etc. with data on the environment into prose form

7. holding group discussions about environmental issues.

Below is an example of an activity (Jacobs, Kumarasamy, Nopparat, and Amy, in press) which incorporates some of the ideas discussed in the article about vocabulary and grammar.

Showing point of view

Suggested Procedure

1. Teacher provides any necessary background on the hunting of seals. Every year, baby seals are killed for their fur. This is usually done by clubbing them to death.

2. Students read Texts 1 and 2. (The texts are not authentic, but are adapted from authentic texts, containing some of the actual wording.)

3. Teacher leads students in discussing differences between the two texts in grammar, content, and word choice. Examples of these differences are:

a. Grammar:
Text 1 uses active voice which makes it clear who does the killing. Text 2 uses a lot of passive voice (See Language Corner) which does not mention who does the killing. (Please note that grammar is a complicated area. A particular form can serve multiple purposes depending on context.)

b. Content:
Text 1 mentions that the seals are babies; Text 2 does not. Text 1 stresses that only relatively few people benefit from the deaths of seals; Text 2 suggests that average people use seal products.

c. Word Choice:
Text 1 uses harsh words such as brutally, violently, and cruel, to describe the seal hunt; nice words are used to describe the seals, such as innocent and beautiful. Text 2 uses nice words, such as painlessly, quality, scientific, and enjoy.

4. Students find texts about issues, including local ones, and analyze them looking at how language is used to express the authors' viewpoints. Environmental groups, embassies, and corporations can be good sources for such texts.

5. In pairs, students choose a controversial environmental issue to write about. One member of the pair writes a text supporting one point of

view on that issue, and the other member writes supporting an opposing point of view on the same issue.

6. They exchange papers and look for the devices (content, word choice, grammar) that the other one used to write their text.

Text 1 — by an organization opposed to the killing of seals:

> Every year, profit-hungry companies murder hundreds of thousands of baby seals. They kill these innocent animals by brutally clubbing them to death and then violently ripping their skins off their bodies in order to make needless luxury products. In the end, a few people get rich from the cruel, senseless slaying of these beautiful animals.

Text 2 — by an association of companies which sell products made of seal skins:

> Every year, hundreds of thousands of consumers buy seal products, in the same way that people buy products that come from cows and pigs. In creating these quality products, the seal harvest is conducted as quickly and painlessly as possible. Scientific methods are used to ensure that the process is a humane one. The result is beautiful products enjoyed by people around the world.

Complex though these environmental issues are, we hope we have helped to raise awareness of important areas of language which affect our thinking and action on the natural world, that is, devices which can be used to cover up or highlight the real causes of environmental degradation as well as some of the choices available in vocabulary and grammar which could encourage us to rethink our relationship with and our actions toward, to put it metaphorically, Mother Earth.

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