UNIVERSITY OF
GLOUCESTERSHIRE

This is a peer-reviewed, post-print (final draft post-refereeing) version of the following published document and is licensed under All Rights Reserved license:

Stibbe, Arran ORCID logoORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3854-9854 (2020) Ecolinguistics and economics: the power of language to build worlds. WEA Commentaries, 10 (3). pp. 2-7.

Official URL: http://www.worldeconomicsassociation.org/files/2020/08/Issue10-3.pdf

EPrint URI: https://eprints.glos.ac.uk/id/eprint/8911

Disclaimer

The University of Gloucestershire has obtained warranties from all depositors as to their title in the material deposited and as to their right to deposit such material.

The University of Gloucestershire makes no representation or warranties of commercial utility, title, or fitness for a particular purpose or any other warranty, express or implied in respect of any material deposited.

The University of Gloucestershire makes no representation that the use of the materials will not infringe any patent, copyright, trademark or other property or proprietary rights.

The University of Gloucestershire accepts no liability for any infringement of intellectual property rights in any material deposited but will remove such material from public view pending investigation in the event of an allegation of any such infringement.

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR TEXT.

Ecolinguistics and economics: the power of language to build worlds

By Arran Stibbe,
Professor of Ecological Linguistics, University of Gloucestershire

I am an ecolinguist, which means I analyse texts to reveal hidden stories and question whether those stories encourage us to protect or destroy the ecosystems that life depends on. This covers everything from analysing advertisements to reveal the techniques they use to encourage us to buy unnecessary and environmentally damaging products, right through to how nature poetry can encourage us to reengage with and appreciate the natural world. The importance of this endeavour is well summed up by the following quotes:

- *Stories are the secret reservoir of values: change the stories that individuals or nations live by and you change the individuals and nations themselves* (Ben Okri 1996, p. 21).
- *Stories bear tremendous creative power. Through them we coordinate human activity, focus attention and intention, define roles, identify what is important and even what is real* (Charles Eisenstein 2011, p. 2*).*

At the core of ecolinguistics is the idea that some of the stories industrial civilisation is based on are not working, because society is becoming increasingly unequal and increasingly destructive of the environment. These 'stories' are not the kind that are read to children at bedtime, shared around a fire, or conveyed through anecdotes in formal speeches. Instead they exist behind and between the lines of the texts that surround us - the news reports that describe the 'bad news' about a drop in Christmas sales, or the 'good news' that airline profits are up, or the advertisements promising us that we will be better people if we purchase the unnecessary goods they are promoting.

More technically, I define stories as cognitive structures in the minds of individuals which influence how they think, talk and act. When stories are widespread across a culture I call them the 'stories we live by'. A simple example is the story PROFIT IS GOOD, which appears so commonly in the media that it goes without question: whenever the profits of a company go up the media portrays this as unqualified good news, no matter how ecologically damaging the company is, how badly it treats its staff, or how damaging its products are for consumers. This story encourages reckless profiteering at the expense of people and the environment. A more balanced story would describe the success of companies in terms of a triple-bottom-line of social, environmental as well as economic performance.

There is, in fact an interesting logic of the triple-bottom-line. Sustainability is often defined in terms of *People, Planet, Profit* or *Society, Environment, Economy*. But the danger of this is that the pursuit of profit itself is then deemed to be part of the actions a corporation takes towards sustainability. It may then become the primary one, with people and planet given a secondary place, and we end up with sustainability having little meaning except perhaps some solar panels on the HQ or a few donations to charity.

In one research project I looked at TED talks about sustainable business and examined the logical relationship between profit and the more altruistic aspects of people, planet, society and environment. Texts 1-4 (see Appendix) are some of the talks I examined. I identified a spectrum in the TED talks, from instrumental expressions at one end to altruistic ones on the other. On the instrumental end, sustainability was seen as *a route towards* profit, as in the following example:

- *About 80 percent of global CEOs see sustainability as the route to growth in innovation and leading to competitive advantage in their industries…So how are companies actually leveraging sustainability to drive hard business results?* (Chris McKnett, State Street, Text 1)

Slightly more altruistic is making a profit while *at the same time* benefiting society:

- How *to make a profit while making a difference* (Audrey Choi, Morgan Stanley, Text 2)

Then even more altruistic is making a profit *in order to* benefit society:

- Profit is the *magic*. Why? Because that profit allows whatever solution we've created to be infinitely scalable. Because if *we* make a profit we can do it for 10, 100, a million, 100 million, a billion. The solution becomes self-sustaining (Michael Porter, Harvard Business School, Text 3)

There's one level of altruism above this one, where profit isn't mentioned at all and only the benefits to society are mentioned:

- We have a *sustainability strategy* called 'people and planet positive' to help guide our business to have a positive

impact on the world. Why would we not want to have a positive impact on the world as a business (Steve Howard, IKEA, Text 4)

These statements can be analysed according to *means* and *ends*. The crucial difference is whether profit is seen as a means for the end of doing something beneficial for the world, or whether profit is seen as an end in itself, with benefiting the world just a path towards making a profit. It is, of course, crucial for institutions of all kinds to be aware of the 'logic of means and ends' in their communications, their strategy documents, and more fundamentally, in the conceptualisation of the institution itself.

I have analysed a great variety of texts from pork industry guidebooks to Japanese haiku in my search for destructive and beneficial ways of using language. But without a doubt the most eye-opening and important texts I've examined are economics textbooks. At first it may be puzzling why an ecological linguist would analyse economics books, but ecolinguistics is concerned with texts that *influence people to protect or destroy the environment* rather than a narrow focus on texts *about the environment.* The concepts of economics are dominant in society and can have a profound influence on how people behave, and therefore on how they treat the environment. And these concepts are both constructed and communicated through language.

I am using the term 'discourse' to describe a particular set of linguistic features that are commonly used by a group in society. These linguistic features convey underlying stories that influence how people think, talk and act. Of course, there is a great variety of economics textbooks written by authors with different ways of conceptualising and writing about the world and so there are many different discourses of economics that find themselves in textbooks. However, in analysing some of the common textbooks used in universities around the world I did find a particular discourse which was very common: *the discourse of neoclassical economics*. This discourse uses a particular cluster of words in specific ways: *consumer, utility, rational, efficiency, well-off* etc., and has particular characteristic grammatical features. Behind these features are stories, and one of the key stories is HUMANS ARE FUNDAMENTALLY SELFISH. I will discuss some examples of the characteristic language of neoclassical economics by looking at examples from four major economics textbooks (Texts 4-8 in the Appendix).

Before beginning the analysis, I should point out that I am not critiquing the textbooks themselves, which may make use of multiple discourses and may problematise neoclassical economics in other places within the books. Instead I am critiquing the pattern of language associated with neoclassical economics, which finds its way not only into textbooks but also across many areas of social life from politics to media to everyday conversation. It is an extremely dominant way of using language, with important consequences for influencing how people treat the environment. That is why my book *Ecolinguistics: language, ecology and the stories we live by* (Stibbe forthcoming) starts with a detailed examination of the discourse of neoclassical economics before going on to other discourses such as climate change denial, nature writing or other discourses which are more directly about ecological issues. This article is based on the book.

The discourse of neoclassical economics often represents itself as merely describing the world as it already exists, but can instead be thought of as *world building.* That's not to say that the world build by the discourse bears no relation to the real world, but it is a simplified account which focuses in certain aspects while overlooking other aspects. The discourse creates a small set of characters for the world it builds, for example:

- *Microeconomics deals with the behaviour of individual economic units. These units include consumers, workers, investors, owners of land, business firms…* (Text 5:3).

I say the 'discourse' creates the characters because it's not just this particular book dividing the world into consumers, workers, etc – this is a pattern which runs across many economics books, political documents, newspapers and other places. The discourse simplifies the complexity of humanity into characters labelled 'consumers' or 'owners' who are all assumed to think and act in the same way. Machin and Mayr (2012, p.81) point out that this kind of functionalisation can 'reduce people to a role which may in fact be assigned by the writer'.

The characters are represented by the discourse as thinking and doing various things (i.e., mental and material processes). Consumers are represented as engaging in mental processes such as 'choosing', 'selecting', 'deciding', 'preferring', and 'wishing'; and material processes such as 'buying', 'paying', 'purchasing', 'trading', 'switching', 'obtaining' or 'entering' the market. With very few exceptions, the processes revolve around deciding what to buy and then buying it, i.e., the consumer is represented as a pure economic actor rather than a multi-dimensional person whose economic behaviour is part of a larger context of life.

The goals that consumers are represented as trying to achieve are all self-centered, e.g., 'the highest level of satisfaction', 'utility', 'wellbeing', 'being well off' and 'do(ing) as well as possible'. For example:

- *consumers maximise utility* (Text 5:149).
- *[consumers] decide…what goods and services to buy…to achieve the highest possible level of satisfaction* (Text 6:6).

- *consumers usually select market baskets that make them as well off as possible* (Text 5:69).
- *[consumers] maximise their wellbeing by trading off the purchase of more of some goods for the purchase of less of others* (Text 5:4).

From an ecological perspective, the problem with this kind of discourse is that it represents the purchase of goods and services as the *only path* towards wellbeing and satisfaction, overlooking non-monetary paths such as sharing goods and services, spending time with friends, enjoying local nature, growing vegetables, learning new things or helping other people. The 'consumer' is a fictional character who spends their days only seeking satisfaction through purchase, but the danger is that influential economic, political and advertising discourses can shape real people to become more like the consumer. We've seen that in higher education where students are increasingly seeing themselves as consumers purchasing a service rather than students seeking an education.

A story which runs through the discourse of neoclassical economics is that HUMANS ARE FUNDAMENTALLY SELFISH. We can see this story in how consumers are represented as never being satisfied:

- *We believe that these assumptions hold for most people in most situations… More **is** better than less: Goods are assumed to be desirable – i.e., to be good. Consequently, **consumers always prefer more of any good to less**. In addition, consumers are never satisfied or satiated; **more is always better, even if just a little better*** (Text 5:70, emphasis in original).
- *people, both rich and poor, want more than they can have* (Text 7:22).

Of course, humans are not naturally insatiable, which is why the advertising industry works so hard to bring into being the kind of consumer that neoclassical economics describes. Daly and Cobb (1994, p. 87) put it:

> *If nonsatiety were the natural state of human nature then aggressive want-stimulating advertising would not be necessary, nor would the barrage of novelty aimed at promoting dissatisfaction with last year's model. The system attempts to remake people to fit its own presuppositions. If people's wants are not naturally insatiable we must make them so, in order to keep the system going.*

The story that HUMANS ARE FUNDAMENTALLY SELFISH is also visible in how *owners* are described. The following is how one of the textbooks describes a character 'Caroline', who is used as a metonym to describe the behaviour of company owners in general:

- *It is conceivable that Caroline started her firm because of an altruistic desire to provide the world with cookies…More likely, Caroline started her business to make money. Economists normally assume that the goal of a firm is to maximise profit, and they find that this assumption works well in most cases…Caroline's objective is to make her firm's profit as large as possible* (Text 6:260).

Notice how the certainty starts off very low ('*conceivable*') when an altruistic goal of providing the world with cookies is considered. It then gets higher ('more *likely*') when the motive of money is considered. And then even higher ('works well in *most* cases') when the goal is maximising profit. By the end, the certainty is very high ('Caroline's objective *is*…') when the goal is making 'profit as large as possible'. This plays down the possibility that owners of companies want to do something useful for the world and instead makes the self-centred goal of profit seem to be their obvious motivation.

The story of humans being selfish extends also to managers:

- *Can the owners of a firm ever be sure that their managers will pursue the business strategy most appropriate to the owner's goals (i.e., profit maximisation)?* (Text 7:9).
- *As a manager of a firm, what are you interested in? A higher salary, greater power or prestige, greater sales, better working conditions, or greater popularity with your subordinates?* (Text 7:12).

The first quotation uses presupposition to express the goals of the owner as obviously being 'profit maximisation', but offers the enticing possibility that managers have freedom to depart from this goal in their day to day running of a corporation. Except that what the manager is representing as doing with their freedom is limited to a narrow list of self-centred goals – salary, power, sales, personal working conditions and popularity. The text could instead have talked about managers using their freedom to improve the environmental performance of the company, provide a better working environment for staff or offer high quality goods which genuinely benefit consumers. The danger is that a would-be manager reading a textbook like this is presented only with a narrow identity for the kind the manager they will become

in the future rather than a set of possible paths.

One final aspect to draw attention to is the erasure of the natural world from the discourse of neoclassical economics. One of the textbooks gives the example of production at a bakery:

- *The kitchen and its equipment are the bakery's capital, the workers hired to make the bread are its labour and the loaves of bread are its output. The bakery's production function shows that the number of loaves produced depends on the amount of equipment and the number of workers…doubling the amount of equipment and the number of workers doubles the amount of bread produced* (Text 8, p.45).

What is missing from this is the wheat that goes into the bread, as well as the plants that the wheat came from, the pesticides and fertilisers used to grow the plants, the fuel used in harvesting and transporting the crop, the water used for irrigation, any damage to the topsoil, and all other environmental considerations.

The same book formalises this into a general equation for the 'production function' (F), defined as:

- *Y = F(K,L) where Y is the number of units produced (the firm's output), K the number of machines used (the amount of capital), and L the number of hours worked by the firm's employees (the amount of labour). The firm produces more output if it has more machines or if its employees work more hours.* (Text 8:47)

Within the equation there is nothing to represent the natural resource which have been damaged or destroyed in order to produce the goods. Williams and McNeill (2005, p. 8) confirm that the above text is not just an isolated example:

- *Raw materials used as inputs in the production process, and any other services provided by the natural environment, were omitted from consideration altogether. Amazingly, they still are. First year economics students are still taught in almost all of the currently popular textbooks that businesses manufacture their products using only labour and machines!*

More generally, Gare (1996, p. 148) describes how neoclassical economics 'virtually excluded nature from consciousness. The economic process was represented as a circular diagram between production and consumption within a completely closed system'.

Ecolinguistics does not only critique discourses which are seen as problematic in ecological terms. It also seeks out beneficial discourses which can encourage people to value the ecosystems which life depends on and find paths towards wellbeing that do not require excess consumption. I will discuss examples from a range of different sources which present alternative viewpoints on economics (Text 9-12 in Appendix).

The first example comes from an investment company advertisement in the magazine *Ethical Consumer:*

- *You may be concerned about the environment, human rights, better employment practices or promoting third world development and cooperatives. Our financial planning [takes account] of your values. We and our clients aim to make a positive difference to the world in which we all live* (Text 9:10).

Like the example of the manager above, this shapes identities through providing a narrow list of possible choices for the reader to consider. Except in this case it is shaping the identity of an 'ethical investor' by restricting the list to altruistic concerns: the environment, human rights, better employment practices, and third world development. Financial considerations such as the accumulation of profit are not mentioned at all.

A more extensive example is Charles Eisenstein's book *Sacred Economics*. Eisenstein's book explicitly declares that a new story is necessary:

- *Anonymity, depersonalisation, personalisation of wealth, endless growth, ecological despoliation, social turmoil and irredeemable crisis are built into our economic system so deeply that nothing less than a transformation of the defining Story of the People will heal it.* (Text 10: 2).

Eisenstein not only declares that a new story is necessary, he also uses language in a particular way that conveys a very different story to that of neoclassical economics:

- *The social dividend, the internalisation of costs, degrowth, abundance and the gift economy, all take us*

away from the mentality of struggle, of survival, and therefore of utilitarian efficiency, and towards our true state of gratitude: of reverence for what we have received and of desire to give equally, or better, from our endowment. We wish to leave the world a more beautiful place than we entered it (Text 10:434).

The idea of the 'social dividend' and 'gift economy' convey the story that economics encompasses more than just situations where money changes hands. The text describes it as an obvious fact that human nature is fundamentally altruistic by presupposing that 'our true state' consists of gratitude, reverence and a desire to give. The expression 'We wish to leave the world a more beautiful place' creates solidarity with the reader by including both author and reader in the pronoun 'we', and expresses with high certainty what the reader desires.

Eisenstein is opposing the neoclassical economics story that HUMANS ARE FUNDAMENTALLY SELFISH with the story that HUMANS ARE FUNDAMENTALLY ALTRUISTIC. Now we could ask which of these stories are true, but human nature is complex and it is possible to describe it in different ways. What is more important is that texts can become self-fulfilling prophesies. A manager who reads economics textbooks and only finds models of selfishness may not consider alternative paths when forging their future identity. Grant (2013) describes evidence from multiple sources that economics students become less altruistic and more selfish through studying traditional economics degrees, concluding that 'Even thinking about economics can make us less compassionate.' Blackmore and Holmes (2013, p. 13) describe evidence that texts which appeal to economic benefit can 'erode our environmental concern, our long-term thinking, our civic motivation and even our wellbeing. Such communications instead make us more materialistic, less likely to act environmentally (such as recycling or conserving water), and less motivated to volunteer or be politically active'. It would be too strong to say that what we read determines our worldview, but certainly it can influence us, particularly if certain paths are absent from what we read.

Another example comes from Tim Jackson's book *Prosperity without Growth*. This book provides an alternative story to PROFIT IS GOOD, but instead of PROFIT IS BAD (which would not be helpful at all) he tells the story PROSPERITY IS GOOD. This story could potentially have all of the disadvantages of a focus on profit, given the usual way that 'prosperity' is equated with financial excess in popular culture. However, Jackson uses language in ways that redefine prosperity:

- *For at the end of the day, prosperity goes beyond material pleasures. It transcends material concerns. It resides in the quality of our lives and in the health and happiness of our families. It is present in the strength of our relationships and our trust in the community. It is evidenced by our satisfaction at work and our sense of shared meaning and purpose. It hangs on our potential to participate fully in the life of society. Prosperity consists in our ability to flourish as human beings – within the ecological limits of a finite planet* (Text 11:5).

Jackson therefore shifts prosperity away from finance and materiality towards things which provide wellbeing without causing ecological destruction. The term 'prosperity' is a highly positive term in English, so PROSPERITY IS GOOD is likely to be much more persuasive than LESS IS GOOD, since 'less' as a marked term is never going to sound positive.

On final example of redefinition is the Kingdom of Bhutan's major efforts to replace the dominant story increased gross national product is the goal of society with INCREASED GROSS NATIONAL HAPPINESS IS THE GOAL OF SOCIETY (as described in Text 12). Happiness is a concept which is both intrinsically positive in English and is less vulnerable to reinterpretation in financial terms than *utility* or *prosperity*. There is a danger, however, that happiness as a goal could be perceived as a selfish pursuit of personal feelings of contentment, along the lines of the consumer in neoclassical economics who seeks to maximise his/her own satisfaction. The Prime Minister of Bhutan explicitly attempts to steer the definition of happiness away from this:

- *We have now clearly distinguished the 'happiness'…in GNH from the fleeting, pleasurable 'feel good' moods so often associated with that term. We know that true abiding happiness cannot exist while others suffer, and comes only from serving others, living in harmony with nature, and realising our innate wisdom* (Text 12 :7).

To conclude, the discourse of neoclassical economics does not transparently 'describe' the world, it 'builds' the world in a particular fashion. It creates certain characters – the consumer, the owner, the producer, the manager. And it endows these characters with personalities, identities, desires and goals. The characters are not entirely different from real people, but people are complex and the kind of simplifications that a characterisation like this makes are necessarily selective. The characters constructed by the discourse of neoclassical economics are fundamentally selfish, wanting only

to maximise profit, sales, salary, status or satisfaction, without a thought given to others or the natural world. This is not the only story possible, however – other versions are possible. That is what, ultimately, a story is – a selective, narrow, simplified representation which is not necessarily 'false' but only one version among many possible versions.

A key task of ecolinguists is firstly to reveal stories which underlie the types of language used in economics. The second step is to question those stories from an ecological perspective - do they encourage people to find wellbeing in ways that do not harm the environment? Where the stories of industrial civilisation are leading towards increased inequality and environmental destruction, the third step is to search for new stories to live by. This involves examining texts both locally and from around the world which are based on very different worldviews.

And. I say 'the task of ecolinguists' but actually I think that everyone should become an ecolinguist: economists, politicians, business leaders, economics students and everyone else should become aware of the language being used to build the world around them and search for positive ways of using language which can help bring into being the kind of world they want to see.

To this end, the *International Ecolinguistics Association* has created an online course *The Stories We Live By* (storiesweliveby.org.uk). In keeping with the sentiments in this article, the course is completely free, with volunteer tutors offering assistance in 11 languages, and free materials available for teachers to use in class. So far the materials have mostly been used in environmental education, language and social science courses but it would be excellent to see them used in the heart of where they are most needed: economics and business courses.

References

Blackmore, E. and Holmes, T., eds., 2013. *Common cause for nature: values and frames in conservation*. Machynlleth, Wales: Public Interest Research Centre.

Daly, H. and Cobb, J., 1994. *For the common good: redirecting the economy toward community, the environment, and a sustainable future*. 2nd Ed. Boston: Beacon Press.

Eisenstein, C., 2011. *Sacred economics: money, gift, and society in the age of transition.* Berkeley: Evolver Editions.

Gare, A., 1996. *Nihilism inc.: environmental destruction and the metaphysics of sustainability*. Como, NSW: Eco-Logical Press.

Grant, A., 2013. Does studying economics breed greed? [online]. *Psychology Today*. Available from: http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/give-and-take/201310/does-studying-economics-breed-greed

Machin, D. and Mayr, A., 2012. *How to do critical discourse analysis: a multimodal introduction*. London: Sage.

Okri, B., 1996. *Birds of heaven*. London: Phoenix. Stibbe, A. forthcoming. *Ecolinguistics: language, ecology and the stories we live by (Second Edition).* London: Routledge

Williams, J. and McNeill, J., 2005. *The current crisis in neoclassical economics and the case for an economic analysis based on sustainable development*. Rochester, NY: Social Science Research Network.

Appendix: Texts analysed in this paper TED TALKS

Text 1 Chris McKnett (2014) *The investment logic for sustainability*. TED www.ted.com/talks/chris_mcknett_the_investment_logic_for_sustainability

Text 2 Audrey Choi (2015) *How to make a profit while making a difference*. TED www.ted.com/talks/audrey_choi_how_to_make_a_profit_while_making_a_difference

Text 3 Porter, Michael (2014) *The case for letting business solve social problems.* TED *www.ted.com/talks/michael_porter_the_case_for_letting_business_solve_social_problems*

Text 4 Steve Howard (2013) *Lets go all-in on selling sustainability.* TED www.ted.com/talks/steve_howard_let_s_go_all_in_on_selling_sustainability

Economics Textbooks

Text 5 Pindyck, R. and Rubinfeld, D., 2012. *Microeconomics* (8th edition). London: Pearson.

Text 6 Mankiw, G., 2011., *Principles of Microeconomics* (6th edition). Nashville: South-Western.

Text 7 Sloman, J. and Jones, E., 2011. *Economics and the Business Environment* (3rd edition). London: Prentice Hall.

Text 8 Mankiw, N., 2003. *Macroeconomics* (5th edition). New York: Worth Publishing.

New Economic Sources

Text 9 *Ethical Consumer Magazine.* Jan/Feb 2014

Text 10 Eisenstein, C., 2011. *Sacred economics: money, gift, and society in the age oftransition.* Berkeley: Evolver Editions.

Text 11 Jackson, T., 2011. *Prosperity without Growth*. London: Routledge.

Text 12 Alkire, S., Ura, K., Wangdi, K., Zangmo, T., 2012. *A short guide to Gross National Happiness Index*. Centre for Bhutan Studies.