



Book Reviews

van Splunder, F. (2020). *Language is Politics: Exploring an Ecological Approach to Language* (160 pp.). Routledge. \$49.95 (US) (Paperback), ISBN: 978-0367365424

Introduction

Language is an intimate process that virtually all humans can understand, produce, and/or engage with cognitively. Consciously or unconsciously and for any reason, humans constantly use language, whether for connecting with others or managing inner thinking such as making plans, composing narratives of one's experiences, creating art, or simply making sense of any phenomena, as well as using it as a tool to gain advantage. However, despite our constant and intimate engagement with it, language has always been an enigma, eluding our complete understanding. Nevertheless, given the close relationship between using language and being human, our quest to understand language is intrinsically tied to fundamental questions about humanity itself, which may lead to various misconceptions, such as the deeply ingrained perception that the complexity of human language separates our species from the rest of the natural world.

In his book *Language is Politics: Exploring an Ecological Approach to Language*, Frank van Splunder challenges ten of the most commonly held misconceptions from a sociolinguistic and historical perspective. In particular, he invites the reader to delve deeper into the intricate and often contentious connections between language and power and to reflect on the nature of language itself and why it is inherently political. As his overall purpose, he develops the argument that if language, as a crucial element in all political activity, is embraced as part of a larger ecosystem, it can cease to be a divisive tool and instead become a liberating force that fosters unity and harmony within diversity, summed up in his statement, "language can be used to shape dreams and paint a picture of a better world based on inclusiveness" (p. 109).

Summary

This book is divided into two parts. The first part comprises the main text, in which the author takes the reader on a sociolinguistic and historical tour of 10 commonly held misconceptions about language. The second much shorter part features the voices of 11 language users describing their diverse language practices, providing authentic and lively illustrations of the explorations described in the first part. Thus, scholarly exposition and authentic narrative complement each other to support the author's main argument, that language is politics, and his vision of an ecological approach to language.

In the first chapter, "The Language Myth," the author explains his overarching argument that language as inherently political, describing any given language as a three-dimensional construction of worldviews, identities, and the language itself as a reflection of the other two. Individuals create various worldviews and identities out of their lived experiences, and differences among these creations give rise to power dynamics, which are inevitably formed and expressed through language. This process has led to several misconceptions, 10 of which are the focus of this book: (1) language A is more beautiful than language B; (2) a language is superior to a dialect; (3) language is practiced only by humans; (4) language determines thought; (5) language determines identity; (6) English is a threat to other languages; (7) Chinese is the language of the future; (8) when a language dies, a culture [entirely] dies; (9) people should pay more attention to speaking and writing correctly; and (10) the more languages one speaks, the more human one is. Throughout this book, van Splunder addresses why each of the statements is a misconception not directly but in a recursive and iterative manner, encouraging the reader to shape their own opinions about them.

In the second chapter, titled "The Origin of Language," van Splunder invites the reader to contemplate the challenging task of defining what language truly is, which involves the questions of whether it is an artificial or natural construct and whether it is exclusive to the human species. The author provides examples such as sign language, Esperanto, and Basic English in order to offer food for thought about the first question as well as whether distinctions between languages and dialects are essentially true or arbitrarily determined. To address human exclusivity, he presents examples of complex communication methods exhibited by various other members of the animal kingdom, such as wolves, birds, and bees, to dispute the contention of scholars such as Noam Chomsky that language is a uniquely human attribute.

In the third chapter, "Imagined Community," van Splunder discusses how people relate to particular languages as a marker of identity and use them to form what Anderson (1983) called "imagined communities." Because of the sheer size of such communities, members will never know most of their fellow members, but their shared language provides a sense of unity, demonstrating the close relationship between language and prevailing ideologies. Through historical accounts of political events in France, Germany, Yugoslavia, etc., the reader in this chapter gains an understanding of how language plays a role in how people imagine their own communities through the lenses of their own narratives and ideologies.

In the fourth chapter, "Language as a Construction," the author provides numerous examples, ranging from nomenclature to nuances of grammar and vocabulary, to demonstrate how language is a construction, the complexity of which goes beyond its role as a means of communication. He uses two terms, introduced by the German linguist Heinz Kloss (1967), "*Abstand*" ('distance') and "*Ausbau*" ('building out'), to explain how people construct languages differently. These constructions define both similarities and differences among groups of people in line with the proximity or remoteness of

their ideologies.

In the fifth chapter, “The Pecking Order of Language,” van Splunder delves further into the broader dynamics of world languages. He provides data from *Ethnologue* and the Power Language Index (PLI) to shed light on the general trend in popularity of world languages and, consequently, the power and ideologies related to certain high-ranked languages. He illustrates his discussion of the relationship between language and power with historical accounts of the rise and fall of some of the most common languages, including English, Chinese (Mandarin), French, Spanish, Arabic (Modern Standard Arabic), Russian, German, Japanese, Portuguese, Hindi, Malay, Bengali, and Dutch.

Following from the exploration of the pecking order of languages in the previous chapter, the sixth chapter, “The Power of English,” focuses on exploring the influence of the currently top-ranked language, English. This chapter prompts readers to consider how the supremacy of English is exercised in various domains, including business, politics, education, and media. He recounts how English has become the most powerful language in the world, leading to a new subtype of power relationships among English speakers.

The seventh chapter, “Language and War,” demonstrates how language, in the context of nationalism, can be utilized during wars both as an individual marker to signify one’s ideological orientation and as a means for a nation-state to justify a group narrative. This function is exemplified in various historical conflicts, ranging from physical wars, like the Battle of Kosovo on June 15, 1389, to more recent, covert types of wars, such as the shift in language hegemony in Belgium. Additionally, van Splunder explores how English is employed as a tool for promoting nationalism, both within the core English-speaking communities of the United States and the United Kingdom and in countries where English is perceived as a threat to native languages.

The eighth chapter, “Life and Death of Languages,” delves into the dynamics of language lifespan and the ways in which human agency affects it, whether positively or negatively. Various cases where languages thrive or are extinguished depending on human involvement are discussed. The author’s concern about the loss of languages is expressed in his statement, “The current linguistic ecosystem is clearly out of balance” (p. 107), referring to the eclipse of linguistic diversity under the shadow of globally powerful languages, comparable in its detrimental effects to the human-driven reduction of biodiversity. Although people can still express their identities when their own language has disappeared as shown in the manifestation of black American culture in the US, a significant portion of the culture related to language will inevitably be lost and this will also affect the ecosystem between languages. By the time the reader has reached the end of the eighth chapter, the salient question becomes much clearer: what can and should be done to release language from its situation as hostage to politics?

The ninth chapter, “Towards an Ecological Approach to Language,” is van Splunder’s pursuit of an answer to the question. Toward this end, highlighting diversity as a key value, he proposes an ecological approach to language by which, quoting Haugen (1972), the “interactions between any given language and its environment” are central to understanding its significance and worth. By advocating for an ecological perspective, he reminds us that “we are not alone in the center—perhaps we are not in the center at all” (p. 108).

The second part, “Personal Language Histories,” provides eleven vivid illustrations of the language practices of individuals in various parts of the world, including the Philippines, Egypt, New Zealand, Cuba, and Kosovo. Their stories serve as vital evidence of how politics are layered within the language uses of these individuals while also showing how English has played a role in their lives,

despite the fact that they all live in different non-English-speaking countries.

Evaluation and Conclusion

Through this book, van Splunder successfully challenges readers to rethink some of the most common misconceptions about language. Along with his extensive knowledge of the history of language, his insights into and critical perspective on the relationship between language and society guide the journey of confronting the challenges of acknowledging that these common beliefs about language are actually fallacies. Furthermore, van Splunder convincingly argues that because language is closely related to the ever-changing flow of human activities, it is in flux by nature. Therefore, we may reasonably assume that we harbor many more misconceptions around us than the ten explored in the book.

What makes this book relevant to a wide audience of readers, including those who are interested in the dynamics of language and language professionals, is that it brings historical and linguistic accounts of a diversity of past and present languages into a discussion of the most widely used language today, English. In doing so, van Splunder persuasively demonstrates the relevance of several historical events, albeit mostly in Europe, to contemporary discussion of how English is related to the power dynamics of the modern world. This perspective, along with insight into common sense misconceptions about language, provides historical depth that can help readers construct a critical view of the currently most powerful language in light of the author's main premise, that language has become a political tool used largely to divide people. The sequence of the first nine chapters makes his case for this position increasingly explicit, leading to his proposal for an alternative, ecological approach to language, which offers the hope that language has the potential to be used to unite rather than to divide. In this regard, van Splunder's proposal is highly relevant to today's world.

Notwithstanding its contributions, in this book, van Splunder explores the position that "language is politics" based on his own experiences and examples that are primarily from European contexts. In this regard, the argument developed in this book would be enriched more by explorations of the political nature of language from a broader range of non-Western viewpoints, which would greatly strengthen the validity of his concluding call for an ecological approach to language.

It may not be possible for us to be completely free from our own biases towards the world. By the time the reader finishes the book, however, it becomes clear that the truths we have held to be self-evident are in fact mere beliefs that reflect the limitations of personal perspective. This insight suggests the importance of finding ways to use language to foster cooperation rather than conflict in the global community, in which linguistically fueled divisiveness continually brings us to the brink of ultimate destruction. While van Splunder's proposal may seem idealistic, this book serves as a valuable resource for those seeking to de-weaponize and decolonize language and reconstruct its use as a resource for supporting harmony in a universal effort to promote the welfare of all of humanity. At the least, it provides an interesting journey for people to debunk common myths about language, whether they are interested language users or language professionals willing to confront their own entrenched beliefs.

References

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