

How the linguistic colonization of the present by the past influences the colonization of other cultures adopting English as second language

C. A. Bowers
University of Oregon

ABSTRACT

The conduit view of language that is widely taken-for-granted in the education of English speaking cultures has marginalized awareness that most of the English vocabulary are metaphors whose meanings were framed by the analogies that can be traced back to earlier thinkers. Thus, words such as “property”, “wealth”, “progress”, “individualism”, “tradition”, “woman”, and so forth, carry forward the earlier ways of understanding—including the prejudices and silences of earlier eras. This essay addresses several of the implications of this process of linguistic colonization of the present by the past within the English speaking communities, as well as how the largely unrecognized process of cultural colonization by the past may be reproduced in teaching English as a second language. One of most important implications relates to how the meaning of words framed by earlier thinkers who were unaware of environmental limits continues to perpetuate the same patterns of thinking that is now globalizing an economic system that is ecologically unsustainable. Another implication of not recognizing that the metaphorical nature of the English vocabulary has a history is that when learning English is associated with becoming modern and progressive, the process of cultural colonization continues. What is often marginalized are the intergenerational forms of knowledge, skills, and mutually supportive relationships that both English and non-English speaking cultures need to revitalize as alternatives to the consumer-oriented lifestyle that has such an ecologically destructive footprint.

Keywords: *linguistic colonization, metaphor, double-bind, framing, ecological, intergenerational, sustainability*

Two groups —English speakers and those who are learning English as a second language— now face a common threat. This is the ecological crisis that is impacting different regions and cultures in ways that vary from the melting of glaciers that are the source of water for hundreds of millions of people, to the drying up of aquifers, the collapse of local fisheries, the spread of droughts, the loss of forests, and the extinction of species that some scientists view as the early stage of entering the world’s 6th extinction of life. Less often mentioned, but no less threatening, are the billions of pounds of chemicals, ranging from PCBs, dioxins, mercury, and pesticides— to cite only a few of the chemicals that have been put into the environment in the name of progress and profit. They can now be found in humans, the water supply, and in the

plants and animals eaten around the world. The crisis has resulted in the poverty and hopelessness experienced by several billion people who are caught between the global spread of a money economy and the loss of their intergenerational knowledge that enabled previous generations to live a subsistence lifestyle within the limits and possibilities of their bioregion.

The focus here will be on how much of the vocabulary that frames the thinking and values of people in English speaking countries and, by extension, the thinking of people who are learning to think and communicate in English as a second language, contributes to deepening the ecological crises. The problem that goes unrecognized in English speaking countries is the linguistic colonization of the present by the past. For people learning to speak English as a second language, the problem is an even more complex process of cultural colonization. Linguistic colonization of the present by the past occurs in English speaking public schools and university classrooms, in the media, in the use of the Internet by English speakers, and in daily conversations when it is ignored that the meaning of words (metaphors) are framed by cultural assumptions that were taken-for-granted at an earlier time in the culture's development.

What is widely overlooked in English speaking settings where students are being socialized in how to think and communicate about different aspects of their culture, as well as about other cultures, is that words have a history. The dominant message, as Michael Reddy pointed out in his pioneering essay, is that the educational processes as well as the everyday use of language, reinforce the idea that language is a conduit in a sender/receiver process of communication. In effect, the widely held assumption is that ideas, information, data, etc., can be put into words and then sent to others through the conduit of language (Reddy 1979). This concept of language is important in maintaining several minor myths that have huge implications —for deepening the ecological crises and for contributing to the linguistic colonization of other cultures. First, the conduit view of language is essential to maintaining the myth that individuals are autonomous thinkers (or have the potential to become so). Second, this view of language supports the idea that the rational process is free of cultural influences. This myth also requires assuming that words have a universal meaning — over time and for different cultures. The third myth is that there is such a thing as objective knowledge, information, and data. This myth hides the reality that observations and other ways of gathering

“objective” information, data, and ideas involve a human observer who relies upon a culturally layered metaphorical language that has a history that is seldom recognized. These three myths, as well as the idea that language is a conduit, marginalize awareness that most words are metaphors. The idea that the analogs that frame the meaning of words are derived from the individual’s embodied experiences, which George Lakoff and Mark Johnson refer to as the source of “embodied reason” (Lakoff and Johnson 1999: 555), further marginalizes the awareness that words have a history, and that individuals are born into a community shared linguistic ecology that provides the initial cognitive schemata for interpreting the world, making value judgments, and that also influences the individual’s embodied experiences (Bowers 2009, Lakoff and Johnson 1999). Recognizing that words have a history should lead to the awareness of another fundamental characteristic of language. That is, most words are metaphors, and their meanings are framed by the process of analogic thinking. In 1885, Friedrich Nietzsche described the process of analogic thinking when he wrote “In *our* thought, the essential feature is fitting new material into old schemas...” (Kaufman 1967: 273). That is, the initial understanding of what is new and thus unnamed is to identify what it is like, or what is similar. For example, in the early stage of developing computer technology there was an awareness that computers “processed” data and information. Psychologists at that time also thought of human intelligence as processing information. This assumed similarity between computers and human thinking led to thinking of computers as devices that exhibited “artificial intelligence”. As people became more accustomed to thinking of computers as exhibiting intelligence, it has become the new analog for understanding the brain as a computer. Another example of analogic thinking is in a textbook that explains that genes are passed from one person to the next in the same way that footballs are passed—which is an analog that most young students understand. In yet another textbook the students’ understanding of a crop of vegetables is introduced as the analog for understanding the life cycle of a forest. This analog leads to the basic misunderstanding that the main difference between farming the forest and a crop of vegetables is the amount of time between when the two “crops” can be harvested.

This mapping of the familiar onto what is new may provide an initial basis for understanding, as long it is emphasized that the new and the already familiar are not represented as identical. What is often overlooked, however, is how the process of

analogic thinking may involve ignoring that the differences are far more important than similarities. The dire consequences that may result from the choice of the wrong analogs can be seen in how President Ronald Reagan explained, in response to his critics, that an economy is like a game, and that the leader of the team does not change the plan in the fourth quarter. Both an economy and a game may be based on a plan, but the difference is that one can walk away from a game that is poorly played and quickly put it in the past. But one cannot walk away and put out of thought an economy that is out of control.

Understanding the new in terms of the already familiar should alert students to being aware that words have a history, and that they carry forward the assumptions, prejudices, and silences of the individuals or groups who established the analogs that subsequent individuals or generations accept as framing the meaning of words. As other aspects of metaphorical thinking are explained, including how this process is key to understanding the linguistic colonization of the present by the past, other examples of metaphorical thinking will be introduced—including how to reframe the meaning of words by introducing new analogs that are ecologically and culturally informed.

A key influence on the choice of analogies that frame and, over time, lead to the reframing the meaning of words, is the existence of what can be referred to as the root metaphors of the culture. The root metaphors in Western cultures, such as patriarchy, anthropocentrism (a human-centered world), individualism, progress, mechanism, and now evolution, have their origins in the mythopoetic narratives, powerful evocative experiences, and other forces in the culture's past and present experiences. Root metaphors provide the largely taken-for-granted interpretive frameworks that influence cultural ways of thinking and practices in a wide range of activities — and over hundreds and even thousands of years. The vocabulary influenced by the root metaphor both reinforces its taken-for-granted status while at the same time excluding words that undermine its conceptual coherence. For example, Johannes Kepler (1571-1630) suggested that instead of thinking of the universe as a divine organism it should be thought of as a giant clockwork. This mechanistic root metaphor continues to be the basis of thinking in the area of artificial intelligence and even taken-for-granted by important environmental thinkers such as E. O. Wilson who refers to the brain as a machine, and as a problem in engineering. The root metaphor of individualism started

out as an image or iconic metaphor that changed over time from being associated with being a subject, to being a citizen, to being self-creating, to being autonomous. It has now become a root metaphor (interpretative framework) in the West that leads to a taken-for-granted understanding that individuals own property and ideas, to the current understanding that they that construct their own ideas and values (as some educators now claim), to possessing civil rights, and so forth.

This brief overview of the role of root metaphors, which are derived from the culture's mythopoetic accounts of the beginning, purpose, and processes of reality, is meant to bring into focus a key aspect of language that is overlooked when the culture's educational processes represent language as a neutral conduit. To restate a point made earlier, words have a history and in many instances the current meanings can be traced to an earlier period in the culture's history when people were responding to a different set of circumstances. That is, analogies that framed the meaning of words that are still taken-for-granted today were settled upon by influential thinkers who were attempting to establish how to think about the changes taking place in their times. John Locke, for example lived during a time of transition in the traditional feudal system of land ownership. The analogy that became his legacy to Western cultures was to claim that private ownership of property is established through the person's labor. Adam Smith, who was concerned about the restrictions of the mercantile system on local farmers and business, argued for "free markets" and observed that members of his community were engaging in activities he described as "truck, barter, and trade". The analogs introduced by Smith and the French Physiocrats (who coined another metaphor, "laissez faire") reflected the community-based experience and thinking of that era. However, the local markets that served as the analogs for his economic theory were ignored by readers who succeeded in reifying and thus turning his metaphorically based theory into a universal truth that has the same status as the law of gravity. That is, the cultural context as well as assumptions and prejudices of Smith's era have been ignored by today's market-liberals who are working to globalize the layers of misunderstandings related to the idea of a free-market economy. To restate what is ignored when language is understood as a conduit in a sender/receiver process of communication: words are not objective representations of the real world, but are, as Nietzsche pointed out, metaphorically based interpretations of people who were responding to the needs of their times. Too

often their responses to the challenges of their times involved a linguistic problem that Gregory Bateson has recently shed light upon.

If we engage in examining the origins of the analogs that are carried forward and continue to influence today's thinking, including the silences and prejudices, we would recognize what is now referred to by Gregory Bateson as *double bind thinking* (1972). Conceptual and moral double binds result from relying upon earlier ways of thinking as the basis for addressing current issues and problems. Double bind thinking increases the likelihood that the metaphors inherited from earlier thinkers will prevent us from recognizing the deep conceptual roots of the ecological crises for the simple reason that these earlier thinkers took for granted many of the same root metaphors that gave conceptual direction and moral legitimacy to the industrial and consumer-dependent culture that is overshooting the sustaining capacity of the Earth's natural systems. Today, the major emphasis in addressing the ecological crisis is to rely upon technological solutions, which leaves these root metaphors unexamined. Thus, economic growth is still seen as part of the solution to the crises of our times even though it further threatens the self-renewing capacity of natural systems.

More specific examples of double bind thinking for speakers of English occurs when they ignore that the analogs that frame the meaning of much of today's key words reproduce the prejudices, silences, and taken-for-granted deep cultural assumptions of earlier thinkers. For example, the analogs for thinking of "technology" as both culturally neutral and as an expression of progress, of "tradition" as a source of individual oppression and a restriction on progress, of "wealth" as measured in material possessions and money, of "intelligence" as an attribute of the autonomous individual and a process that occurs in the brain, of "freedom" as a right of the individual that needs to be expanded without limits, of "community" from the anthropocentric perspective that excludes awareness of the animals and plants that share with humans the same physical space, of "literacy" as representing a more advanced stage of cultural development, and so on, have all been influenced by different combinations of the West's dominant root metaphors that were taken-for-granted in the past—and are still taken-for-granted by the majority of today's speakers of English.

As we begin to recognize that both cultures and natural systems can be understood as ecologies (which means expanding the meaning of the word beyond how Ernst Haeckel reduced the Greek word *oikos* in 1866 to mean the study of natural systems) the above metaphors, as well as many other English words (metaphors) take on profoundly different meanings. For example, both cultural and natural ecologies have a history and face the challenge of surviving into the future. Given this understanding, culturally and ecologically informed analogs that frame the meaning of the word “tradition” no longer reproduce the Enlightenment thinkers’ way of thinking of traditions as privileging small groups over others and of standing in the way of progress and rational thought. Similarly, if we understand cultural and natural ecologies in terms of information circulating through the interdependent systems, and of the patterns that connect within and between both ecologies, it becomes clear that the old analogs for understanding “intelligence”, “freedom”, “individualism” and so forth, need to be radically revised. These context free metaphors were derived from the abstract theories of western philosophers and theorists who ignored other cultural ways of knowing as well as the cultural influences on their own thinking (Bowers 2007). We also need to take account of what Bateson refers to as *the unit of survival* —which takes account of how the individual is nested in the cultural ecology that is simultaneously nested in the natural ecology.

As many non-English speaking cultures are facing the impact of global warming and other forms of environmental degradation that have far more severe consequences than what is being experienced in western countries, the problem of linguistic colonization of the present by the past becomes an even greater challenge where English is being adopted as a second language —and in some instances, as the primary language for relying upon western technologies and for participating in the global economy. If English words such as “development”, “modernization”, “market”, “progress”, “state”, “science”, “poverty”, and so forth, are taught as though they represent different universal possibilities, in the same way that gravity is understood as universal reality, then the colonization of the present by past influential English speakers is being ignored. That is, if students learning the meaning of English words do not question the current appropriateness of the analogs settled upon at earlier stages in the development

of English speaking cultures, they will be undergoing the worst case scenario of linguistic colonization.

If the English vocabulary were informed by analogs derived from a deep understanding of the differences in the world's cultural ecologies as well as the natural ecologies, the linguistic colonization associated with learning English would not be so life threatening. But it would still be a form of linguistic and thus cultural colonization. Given the thousands of years it has taken to revise the analogs as well as the underlying root metaphors for such English words as "environment" and "woman", which are still not widely adopted in English speaking countries, it is not likely that other key metaphors in the English vocabulary will be revised in ways that avoid the double bind that Albert Einstein warned about when he observed that we cannot rely upon the same mindset to fix the problem that it created.

There are a number of other important issues connected with learning English as a second language. One of the issues relates to learning English from a printed source. As Walter Ong and others have pointed out, print-based communication alters consciousness in fundamental ways (Muhlhausler 1996, Ong 1982). The form of cultural colonization that occurs when print-based communication is relied upon, such as in computer-mediated learning, is that print reproduces many of the characteristics of a conduit view of language, including how it hides that words have a culturally specific history as well as how it reinforces a taken-for-granted attitude toward abstract thinking. The printed word, whether appearing in a book or on a computer screen, marginalizes the importance of local contexts, tacit understandings, and the patterns of meta-communication that are integral to spoken English. It also marginalizes the importance of personal memory of identity forming narratives and relationships with mentors and others who nurture and model how to participate in the largely non-monetized intergenerational commons—which, in most cultures, have a smaller ecological footprint. In short, print-based approaches to learning English contribute to the reification of the analogs settled upon by earlier thinkers, thus making it difficult for the first-time learner to question them.

There is another issue that arises when English is being learned as a second language. As local communities in English speaking countries are rediscovering the

intergenerational knowledge, skills, and practices that represent alternatives to the industrial and consumer dependent lifestyle that has such an adverse impact on the environment, there is beginning to be a change in the analogs that frame the meaning of such words as tradition, individualism, freedom, community, intelligence, progress, and so forth. For example, associating tradition with learning how to preserve vegetables as well as the daily practices of the older generation that are less reliant upon increasingly scarce sources of energy and water means that the Enlightenment derived analogs that represented tradition as an obstacle to progress are less taken-for-granted today. Similarly, the old analogs that represented all forms of change, especially in the area of technology and in the development of new markets and consumer goods, as the expression of progress are also being increasingly questioned as people are beginning to ask what traditions of community self-reliance are being overturned. The old analogs that framed the meaning of individualism, freedom, and community are also beginning to be questioned as the emerging root metaphor of ecology becomes more widely understood as the explanatory framework for understanding the interdependence between cultural and natural systems.

The key point is that if the teachers of English as a second language are unaware that the ecological crises is causing fundamental linguistic changes among a small yet growing segment of the population in English speaking countries they may be teaching their students to adopt the meaning of words framed by the earlier analogs that are now being questioned and modified in way that take account of how to live more ecologically sustainable lives. Changes in the root metaphors of patriarchy, anthropocentrism, and even mechanism, which framed the meaning of much of English vocabulary that still justifies economic and cultural colonization, are beginning to be revised as the explanatory power of new root metaphors such as evolution and ecology are recognized as more relevant to meeting today's challenges. In effect, the emerging analogs that are reframing the meaning of words are being contested by reactionary groups still holding onto the assumptions that underlie the industrial and consumer-dependent lifestyle, and the old analogs are being challenged by social groups who are beginning to exercise ecological intelligence that is informed about the interdependencies of cultural and natural systems. The linguistic changes occurring in English speaking countries that are resulting from the growing awareness of the cultural

roots of the ecological crisis means that teaching English cannot be separated from helping students understand how linguistic changes mirror the contending political and economic forces in English speaking countries.

There is a third issue that needs to be addressed in teaching English as a second language. That is, not only is there a need to introduce students to how the different ways in which key words are being contested and revised in English speaking countries, students also need to be encouraged to consider how the old analogs that framed the meaning of English words would, if accepted as the way everyday reality should be understood, undermine traditions that the students think essential to their own self-identity and sense of community self-reliance. They should also be encouraged to question whether the new ecologically informed analogs that are changing the meaning of English words have implications for rethinking the historically constituted analogs that underlie their own vocabulary. Do the historically constituted analogs that frame the meaning of key words in their own language take account of such challenges as the ecological crisis that earlier influential thinkers were unaware of?

Following Ivan Illich's suggestion, Wolfgang Sachs published a series of essays by Third World writers who examined how adopting the still dominant English meaning of such words as "development", "progress", "markets", "needs", "poverty", and so on would introduce fundamental changes in local ways of thinking and practices. The collection of essays, titled *The Development Dictionary: A Guide to Knowledge as Power* (1992), provides a model of what also needs to be included in teaching English. Escaping from the subtle and complex ways in which linguistic colonization occurs can only be achieved by questioning the cultural assumptions taken-for-granted by earlier influential thinkers who established the analogs for judging what represents "developed" and "modern" cultures, and what cultures are to be viewed as undeveloped and backward. The ecologically informed analogs are reframing the meaning of words of these colonizing words by foregrounding the importance of such words and phrases as "ecologically sustainable", "eco-justice", and "local knowledge".

As the linguistic colonization of the present by the past is not unique to English, the need to conserve ecologically sustainable cultural practices is closely related to the need to conserve the diversity of the world's languages. This will require greater awareness

that words are metaphors, that they have a history, and that the analogs that frame their meaning are derived from mythopoetic narratives and powerful evocative experiences that underlie culturally specific assumptions that are too often taken for granted. Whether classroom teachers and university professors can avoid relying upon the conduit view of language that marginalizes the awareness that most words are metaphors that often carry forward the misconceptions, prejudices, and silences of earlier generations will be a challenge that must be met if they are to avoid the double bind that Bateson and Einstein identified.

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