A CONCEPTUAL ANALYSIS OF SOCIAL DARWINISM. COMPETITIVE VERSUS CONSTRUCTIVIST PARADIGMS

M. R. LUNGU[1], Alina-Andreea DRAGOESCU URLICA[1] , Laura-Ioana COROAMA-DORNEANU[1]

[1]***Banat's University of Agricultural Sciences and Veterinary Medicine "Regele Mihai I al Romaniei",***
Corresponding author: mariuslungu77@gmail.com

Abstract. *An ideology is a mixture of scientific and unscientific statements, which often include rational alongside irrational assertions. It is easy to be misled into thinking that they are entirely scientific, when they are only partially accurate and analogies they are based on do not stand the test of critical thinking. Ideologies are often meant to establish and legitimize a new worldview or even to replace theories which may initially be more accurate than they are distorted to become. The case of Social Darwinism may be regarded as such an ideology, given the fatal flaws in its analogical discourse, which the paper purports to explore. The starting point of this particular ideology was Charles Darwin's theory of natural selection, taken to include slightly different meanings than initially intended. According to this theory, organisms better adapted to the environment are more likely to eliminate their competitors. Given this theoretical hypothesis, the terminology of social Darwinism was later introduced and researchers who supported this novel outlook were styled "social Darwinists", despite essential differences from Darwin's theory. The main concepts of social Darwinism include tenets such as fierce natural selection dictating success, the survival of the fittest, and the struggle for existence, which are considered under a radically different ethical paradigm by eco-semiotic interpretations. We argue that an ideologically biased outlook may paradigmatically affect the world we live in a way which is unbeneficial to humanity and it should therefore be replaced by a more constructive, cooperative paradigm which we are striving to enforce, as educators within the humanities. Finally, from an educational and qualitative point of view, language choice and theoretical constructions entail significant cultural consequences. Thus, the teaching and learning of conceptual system decoding supports critical thinking, which may in turn generate the construction of optimized patterns of social interaction.*

Keywords*: conceptual analysis, social Darwinism, natural selection, competion, cooperation, eco-linguistics, construction of meaning.*

INTRODUCTION

Within a cognitive semantic framework, the paper examines the conceptual implications underlying a pivotal notion in life sciences, which has also been borrowed by the social sciences and applied in a largely consequential manner over the past century: evolution. Although Darwinian and later interpretations differ widely, some of the core tenets of evolutionism have significant consequences from an ethical point of view and correspond to particular worldviews, depending on assumptions behind interpretations which turn theories into ideologies. Based on contemporary trans-disciplinary cultural studies, this critical analysis looks at the Darwinian theory of evolution applied and transferred to social Darwinism by means of a reductionist framework, which reinterprets basic concepts like evolution in terms of struggle and survival of the fittest.

The paper compares the classical evolution theory – the concept which has had perhaps the most consequential impact on the life sciences – as opposed to its application in the social sciences by argumentative and analogical transfer. This discussion illuminates how Spencer's social Darwinism and other interpretations of Darwin's original conceptual scheme are conducive to significant ethical consequences and correspond to potentially hazardous worldviews. The doctrine of social Darwinism or, more accurately, the ideological strand of

this theory, emphasizes that human groups and societies are subject to natural selection in the same manner that other organisms are in the context of nature. The question is whether it was right to apply the theory of natural selection to human society, which supposedly displays a higher level of self-organization than that of nature – that is the level of ethical construction of intangible human heritage based on conscious choice.

The study proposes a conceptual analysis of social Darwinism and evolution more generally, from the perspective of ecolinguistics and biosemiotics, which have recently taken an integrative approach to this notion. Social evolution, in its broad sense, may be looked at as a phylogenetic continuity of progressive stages with particular application to the way people interact with society. The patterns of interaction and cooperation which can be observed on an organismic level are further extended to the level of social organization in human society. This includes conscious building not only of formal aspects, but also intangible qualities such as cultural and ethical values, as well as creative and participatory aspects which we deem essential to the organization of a higher-level order. We surmise that establishing proper dialogical conditions for a more coherent overall social dialogue would lead to an opportune updating of the system of social partnership on an extensive scale, which would benefit humankind, as well as the habitat we are currently working to destroy.

A coherent systemic framework integrates all dimensions of life, including cognitive and social aspects. Given the main task of the humanities and educational research, this approach is also aiming to contribute in the building of sustainable communities and communicational networks. The evolutionary phylogenetic perspective has led to a hierarchical outlook on life, which went beyond Darwin's initial intentions. As social designers took up this worldview, 20th century institutions were based on limitless growth, competition, and exploitation, which are now deemed incongruous with the order of co-constructive networking and shared meaning making through higher communication abilities used within social systems (Luhmann, 1986: 174-178;). What we are striving for in ESP classes is to enable students understand that we are in a process of learning from nature and we are in a need of understanding how genuine communication operates. In the new paradigm, evolution is no longer seen as a struggle for existence, but a cooperative exchange of resources because isolated organisms are unsuccessful in nature. This does not mean competition is not acknowledged in striving for optimal results, but it is focused on improving the overall state rather than on exploitation of the others and of our limited resources. Thereby, constructive human societies aim to establish a new worldview which deeply heeds interrelatedness, networking, and cooperation – also the basic principles we endeavor to apply in our teaching (Dragoescu Urlica & Stefanović, 2018; Bogusławska-Tafelska, 2016; Coroama, 2016).

MATERIAL AND METHODS

The discussion is primarily based on qualitative research, critical synthesis and constructivist pedagogy, as well as the larger framework of ecolinguistics and biosemiotics. Also, the study proposes in-depth conceptual analysis of the core notions of evolution, cooperation, and constructive dialogue that a genuine understanding of evolutionary theory rests upon, despite biases interpretations of the past (namely, ideologies). Research conducted in an interdisciplinary manner, including not only biological, but also humanistic, semiotic and conceptual analysis, is likely to provide more accurate and, above all, more meaningful insights into the topic under scrutiny.

The basic vocabulary of evolutionism, as well as social Darwinism, encompasses some of the most highly cited notions across sciences and these are used as argumentative bases for the most incredibly diverse array of theories, sometimes contradictory or even

incompatible. From a holistic standpoint, an ecolinguistic interpretation would point to creative evolution rather than survivalist dynamics ("survive or perish").

In addition, from a constructivist pedagogical as well as biosemiotic point of view, individuals from all species are not taken in isolation, but understood to co-evolve together. This is precisely the reason why eugenic tempering with complex networks may entail devastating consequences that are as yet beyond our limited comprehension. When science is in tune with education and they both operate based on deep ecological understanding of inter-relatedness and co-evolution, our world view is greatly improved, with a focus on optimal communication, unbounded creativity, and higher level evolution.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Ecolinguistics is a novel framework of linguistic research which goes beyond narrow formalism in the study of language processes. It unveils assumptions hidden beneath discursive constructions with vast effects on the (re)shaping of social systems and even ecosystems. In order to accomplish such significant tasks, the new paradigmatic shift within the humanities takes into account the larger context language is embedded in from a social and ecological point of view, as well as the effects use of language potentially generates.

Ecolinguistics, coupled to eco- and bio-semiotics, highlight the extensive correlations which result from our conceptual frameworks, which are projected upon ecosystems and constructed habitats, as well as human culture(s) at large. These new areas of semiotic research thus become highly relevant in accounting for the ways our interaction patterns, choice of language and conceptual options trigger consequential social and ecological impacts. As Halliday (1990) points out, the contextual analysis of language is highly relevant, as it affects our understanding of life and the framing of meaning for social purposes. For instance, whenever concepts such as competition, growth, evolution, or progress are conceptualized in positive terms, this may nonetheless lead to destructive consequences in terms of ecosystemic balance (Halliday, 1990: 175).

The ecological perspective on discourse construction is perhaps best illustrated by Halliday's (1990) synthetic caution that "language does not passively reflect reality; language actively creates reality" and "lexicogrammar… transforms our perceptions into meanings" (Halliday & Matthiessen, 1999: 11). The challenging aspects identified from this standpoint revolve around language construction, the register of scientific discourse, and the register of language more generally, including prejudice, which thus constructs racism, "growthism" and various types of "classism". Thus, our role as linguists within a post-cognitive and ecolinguistic paradigm is to use language as "a metatheory for understanding how grammar functions as a theory of experience" (ibid.: 14), knowing that to educate also means "to reflect on how language construes the world" (ibid.: 30). These aspects which take into account value system construction, co-evolution on the background of creativity within natural and human ecosystems are deemed more essential to our survival than the struggle to eliminate competition according to biased interpretations of the "meaning" of evolution theory.

The conceptual foundation of evolution by natural selection came to represent a fundamental basis of interpretation for a countless number of theories across all scientific fields. It was such a revolutionary concept in biology that "nothing can be understood to make sense except in the light of Darwinian evolution" (Mayr in Sanchez, 2010: 66). The contextual analysis of evolutionist ideas as they progressed towards new interpretations deployed as social Darwinism epitomizes the transformation of a theory into an ideology with far-reaching implications. Spencer's synthetic thinking had such a sweeping impact during his age that it was assessed as "a fossil specimen from which the intellectual body of the period may be

reconstructed" (Hofstadter, 1992: 31). The commonly accepted perspective on social Darwinism emphasizes extreme competition on the marketplace, while the Spencerian catchphrase "survival of the fittest" was employed to justify boundless greed (Bowler, 2009: 274). However, the restrictive manner in which Spencer's conceptual system has been narrowed down to this singled out coinage has generated a diminishing interest in the rest of his work, followed by a current revival, which attempts to use Spencerian ideas for better purposes (Degler, 1991: 11).

Thus, social Darwinism is a classic example of how a scientific theory can be turned into an ideology by sociologists, economists, socio-biologists and other parties which may have a stake in so doing. Scientific statements about human society are only partially verifiable and thus open the way for discourses that incorporate both rational and irrational aspects, scientific facts as much as unscientific biases. Social Darwinism has been used as a justification for imperialism, racism, eugenics, and a number of extremist ideologies. Hawkins discusses four fundamental features of social Darwinism:

1. all organic nature, including humans, are governed by the same biological laws;
2. population growth generates a struggle for existence due to limited food resources;
3. physical and mental traits provide an advantage in the struggle for life or in sexual competition, which are inheritable;
4. the cumulative effects of selection and heredity have led over time to the emergence of new species and the extinction of others.

Although social Darwinism is named after Charles Darwin, the scientist was not primarily responsible for this ideology which used evolution theory as an argumentative basis for a social program. What is more, Darwin's discoveries are thought not to have impacted social theories of the time: "Darwin's discoveries occasioned no revolution in social theory, but instead involved remapping, with the assistance of a theory of the biological inheritance of character traits" (Claeys, 2000: 228). However, two key concepts of Darwinian Theory were borrowed from social theorists: "survival of the fittest" had been coined by Herbert Spencer and "the struggle for existence" had been introduced by Thomas Malthus.

According to Johnoson, Spencer had developed the idea of struggle for survival borrowed, in turn, from the natural sciences, in two directions which were applied to social structures. In this world view which deviates from natural observations, "evolution provides an explanation for all phenomena: political, economic, military, psychological and social" (Johnson, 2018: 136). Thus, a concept applicable to natural systems is projected by analogy and superimposed upon societal structures beyond the individual, including whole societies and nations which are "lawfully" struggling for supremacy.

By the same token, Malthusian theory was built on deductions dictated by statistical considerations: whereas the reproductive forces in nature increased in geometric progression, food resources only increased in arithmetic progression. Such conceptual schemes were employed to discourage charity and reformative legislation which supported the poor, resulting in a type of social engineering conducive to eugenics. Upon reading Darwin's work, the proponent of eugenics, Galton, considered he had found the scientific foundation for a new science setting its target to improve the human race. By analogy with natural laws, Galton deemed societies which protect the weak to be in contradiction with the theory of natural selection, thus leading to a "regression to mediocrity". In his private correspondence with Galton, Darwin identifies the greatest difficulty in imposing such a scheme to be axiological exercise and ethical choice making, i.e. "deciding who deserved to be on the register. How few are above mediocrity in health, strength, morals and intellect; and how difficult to judge on these latter heads ... and you have pointed out the sole feasible, yet I fear utopian, plan of

procedure in improving the human race" (Darwin, 2014 [1873]). Moreover, it should be noted that Darwin's speculations in The Descent of Man revolve around civilized society as opposed to natural laws. It is conceded that human societies attempt to find palliative measures for the weak or to build asylums for the feeble-minded and the sick, whereas unfit domestic animals would doubtlessly not be allowed to breed, according to commonsense, for fear of degeneration (Darwin, 1981 [1871]: 168).

Despite a period of decline, social Darwinism had re-emerged by the mid-1960s, especially in Britain and the USA, later to have an influence on sociobiology and reassessed evolutionary theories (Hawkins, 1997: 292). This issue will be discussed in a future study, as the present research has focused on the reinterpretation of evolution theory within social Darwinist theory. Whereas Darwinism highlights diversity (survival as a result of diversification), a growing tendency towards complexification and the creativity of nature, social Darwinism, in its narrow interpretation, focuses on determinism, social selection and domination. While these could also be called into question, the question we ought to develop and further ponder upon is what kind of human civilisation we wish to create.

A major purpose of this study has been to re-orient educational discourses such as eco-pedagogy and communication practices towards cultural change to foster less competitive and more collaborative language practices and conceptualisations. For this reason, the critique of social Darwinism might also inform the topics and strategies adopted by ecolinguistically-minded educators in high quality EFL and ESP classrooms. Finally, we wish to highlight the focus on the qualitative difference between human beings and other species, which semiotically go beyond the gradual difference observed from a phylogenetic point of view. Other focal points for educators in humanistic areas include the appreciation of diversity as a spur for higher levels of evolution within a human value system.

CONCLUSIONS

An important aspect of our study targets the educational value of encouraging students in areas of both natural and social sciences to make better use of critical thinking skill sets in acquiring fundamental concepts to dismantle underlying assumptions and to discriminate among theoretical constructions which may or may not be in line with current world views. These objectives might be reached only in the light of a larger humanistic understanding of value systems of a qualitative nature, (as opposed to quantitative or statistical). The values that the humanities and educators within these fields strive to cultivate fall in the category of "intangible cultural heritage" and must therefore be preserved, though outside the scope and irrespective of profitability from any quantifiable points of view.

The conclusion verifies our hypothesis that teaching essential concepts of science (both natural and social or other adaptations) entails great responsibility, as the way learners perceive acquired knowledge may carry consequential implications. In the light of ecolinguistics, underlying assumptions in the theories we construct have the potential to generate diverse world views and particular kinds of meaning – for instance, in our case, the conceptualization of evolution on so many different levels. More holistic approaches within the humanities, such as ecolinguistics and biosemiotics, prove useful for such purposes, while reductionism has failed to rise up to the task of elucidating complexity in (human) nature.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

BOGUSŁAWSKA-TAFELSKA, M., 2016 – Ecolinguistics. Communication Processes at the Seam of Life. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang.

BOWLER, P. J., 2004 – "The Spectre of Darwinism: Popular images of Darwinism in early twentieth-century Britain" in Lustig, A., Richards, R.J. and Rose, M. (eds) Darwinian heresies. Cambridg, U.K.

BOWLER, P. J., 2009 – Evolution: The History of an idea. Berkeley, University of California Press, U.S.

CLAEYS, G., 2000 – The "Survival of the Fittest" and the Origins of Social Darwinism , Journal of the History of Ideas, 61(2):223-240 University of Pennsylvania Press, U.S.A.

COROAMA, L., 2016 – "Bridging the Gap between Teaching Language and Teaching Culture in a Foreign Language Course", *RJAS* 48:3.

DRAGOESCU URLICA, A. A. & STEFANOVIĆ, S., 2018 – "Ecolinguistic Qualities of the Optimal English Language Learning Experience", International Journal for Quality Research 12(2): 537-546.

DARWIN, C., 1981 [1871] – The Descent of man and selection in relation to sex. Princeton University Press.

DARWIN, C., 2014 [1873] – The Correspondence of Charles Darwin. vol. 21. Cambridge University Press.

DEGLER, C. N. 1991 – In Search of human nature: The Decline and revival of Darwinism in American social thought. New York: Oxford University Press.

HALLIDAY, M. A. K., 1990 - New ways of meaning: The challenge to applied linguistics", Journal of Applied Linguistics, *6*:7-36.

HALLIDAY, M. A. K. & MATTHIESSEN, CH. M. I. M., 1999 – Construing Experience through meaning: A Language-based approach to cognition. London: Cassell. Online: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/235766532_Construing_Experience_Through_Meaning_A_Language_Based_Approach_to_Cognition [accessed Aug 13 2020].

HAWKINS, M., 1997 – Social Darwinism in European and American Thought 1860-1945. Cambridge University Press.

HOFSTADTER, R. 1992 [1944]) – Social Darwinism in American thought. Boston: Beacon Press.

JOHNSON, P., 2018 - Darwin: Portretul unui geniu [Portrait of a genius], Bucuresti: Humanitas.

LUHMANN, N., 1986 – "The Autopoiesis of social systems", F. Geyer & J. Van d. Zeuwen. (eds.). Sociocybernetic Paradoxes: Observation, Control and Evolution of Self-Steering Systems. London: Sage, 172-192.

SANCHEZ, L., 2010 – "Darwin, artificial selection, and poverty: Contemporary implications of a forgotten argument", Politics and the Life Sciences 29(1): 61-71, Cambridge University Press.