The Ecology of Communicative Competence

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Abstract

The essay discusses the dialectics of linguistic and communicative competence and develops a concept of ecological communication and ecological communicative competence. The traditional homogeneity paradigm for linguistics – e.g. formulated by Noam Chomsky – is contrasted with the heterogeneity paradigm of the ecology point of view. Two models are elaborated; the first one concerns the different social, biological, and ideological polarities constituting every situation of communication; the second one is a matrix of cognition and illustrates the dialectics of four constituents of human cognition, i.e. sensation, emotion, perception and conception. Both models imply the fact that all people are different and not identical to each other. It is argued that the traditional question of *linguistic correctness* has to be replaced by the question of *the ecologically best practises of communication within and between biotopes, cultures and speech communities.*

In the preceding decades ecolinguistics has dealt with concepts like *homo- vs. heterogeneity, mono- vs. multicultural, bigger vs. smaller* in order to question the dominant capitalistic globalization, the ways of production, consuming and communication, the ways of life. Instead of war and destructive competition between people, ecolinguistics has requested *friendship* and *cooperation*. Instead of capitalistic growth we have underlined the necessity of *sustainable* development and a huge variety of species – a *diversity* of different plants, animals, individuals and cultures – and languages.

Ecolinguistics has been part of a general political and scientific movement considering the Earth as a whole – an ecological entity consisting of different biotopes all over the world in a kind of vital balance within and between the areas. We have been studying and criticizing dialogues and texts from an ecological perspective by means of traditional methods for text-, discourse- and dialogue-analysis, a kind of applied linguistics emphasizing a special context and focus like other special branches of applied linguistics, such as socio- and psycho-linguistics. Furthermore some scholars

have been engaged in the development of new theories and paradigms that reflect both language and linguistics in the recent state of global development. This essay is a contribution to the development of ecolinguistic theories and paradigms for ecological reflections.

1. Language and communication

Language and communication are both *genetic* and *constitutive* parts of human life. All the languages have been developed as an answer to the necessities of human community; thus human communication is a genetic condition for a human language. And – on the other hand – today the languages have been obligatory parts of human communities. In modern society communicative competence implies a high degree of linguistic competence. And you cannot have a linguistic competence without a skilled and experienced knowledge of the culture – nature and society – in which the language in question is used to communicate. As a matter of fact you are only able to translate – or understand a translation – from one language to another one if you – within some critical limits – know both of the cultures implied.

The implications of the dialectical constitution of language and communication have been considered in different ways of different theoretical schools and language policies. One extreme position says that you and everybody have to learn the language and be skilled like a machine, and then you will be able to communicate with everybody in that society. An opposite extreme will say that you will be able to communicate with everybody by means of your communicative body and open mind, with or without use of verbal language. From a dialectical point of view we can discuss whether the problem in one situation is more a problem of linguistic competence or more a problem of communicative competence, but we cannot separate them.

In a country like Denmark we have had the one and same language over more than a thousand years as both the national language and the everyday language for the people living there. We have had some variations – a few slightly different dialects – with one writing system and mutual understanding between persons from the different dialects. Since the industrial production and the bureaucratic state were established in the end of the 19th century, we have got a more and more narrow tolerance in the criteria for

written Danish and the canonical cultural knowledge, i.e. Danish national culture. On the other hand, during the 20th century Denmark and Danes have been more and more engaged in international trade, economy and cooperation; today the official Denmark recognizes Denmark as a part of the modern global economy and high tech information society.

On one hand Denmark has an extremely homogenized language and culture – <u>today with a tendency towards</u> a highly specified curriculum for preschool and primary and secondary school, and a very low tolerance towards diversity in oral and written discourse, especially against immigrants and fugitives. On the other hand the future for young Danes is supposed to imply linguistic and communicative competence in international English, because the standards in most areas more and more become international standards. The governing right wing and populist parties in Denmark have decided that the children of the immigrants shall not be taught <u>their mother tongue and culture;</u> they have to learn Danish as the one and only cultural basis for everybody in Denmark, and in some schools and kindergarten it is directly forbidden to communicate by means of other languages than Danish.

Traditional linguistics, too, has maintained this homogeneity point of view as the paradigm condition for proper linguistics. In his famous book *Aspects of the theory of syntax* NOAM CHOMSKY stated,

> Linguistic theory is concerned primarily with an ideal speaker-listener, in a completely homogeneous speech-community, who knows its language perfectly and is unaffected by such grammatically irrelevant conditions as memory limitations, distractions, shifts of attention and interest, and errors (random or characteristic) in applying his knowledge of the language in actual performance. This seems to me to have been the position of the founders of modern general linguistics [...].
> (Chomsky 1965:3)

This idealized paradigm imply that

  (a) The language is defined by a speech-community; the language in question is the language of the speech-community;

(b) The speaker-listener is defined as one person, not as two persons as two different individual parts of the communication, a speaker and a listener;

(c) Thus the persons involved in linguistic communication are supposed to be identical and without individual differences;

(d) There are no differences between the individual language of the speaker-hearer and the language of the community – the speaker-listener knows its language perfectly;

(e) The language is static and the person operates like a machine – or a part of a machine.

The classical Chomsky formulation refers to a linguistic project that, unfortunately, still is in accordance with the machinery way of producing and communicating in the industrialized society, and the homogenizing tendencies of modern globalization. But the project is in conflict with any form of an ecological approach towards more multicultural societies and multinational cooperations based upon principles of sharing and respect of diversity.
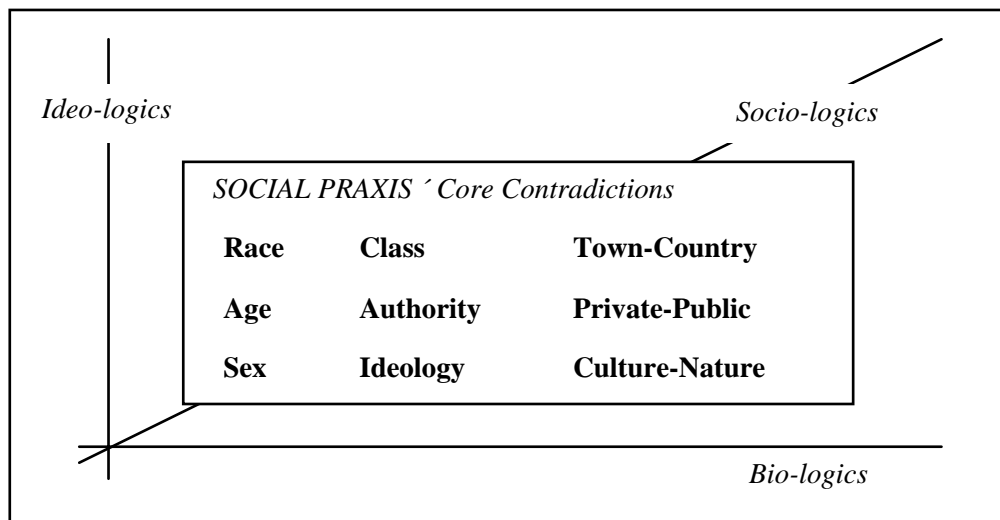
Such an ecological approach has to deal with the heterogeneity and contradictions which constitute a society. All members of society are engaged in all of the following core contradictions that are interrelated and change over time <u>and</u> place. The different individuals are participating as the more dominant or dominated part of the dialectical relationships,

- *Age*: child vs. adult, the different stages of childhood, youth, adult, parent, grandparent, etc.;
- *Sex*: boy vs. girl; man vs. woman; fertile vs. infertile; hetero- vs. homosexual;
- *Race*: the different colours and cultures, ethnicity; integration vs. apartheid;
- *Ideology*: the different world views, religions, values, juridical and ethical laws, paradigms of science and true knowledge;
- *Classes*: the different positions, rights and competences in the social order;
- *Authority:* the different positions in authority relations such as teacher vs. pupil, doctor vs. patient, parent vs. child;

- *Private-Public:* the different fields or domains of the social order, with different juridical and economical conditions for the individual and the community and for different individuals;
- *Town-Country:* the different ways and places of living in relation to production and consumption of foods and goods, with different ecologies;
- *Culture-Nature:* the different ways of living in relation to the complexity of artificial media and products.

These nine core contradictions imply significant and important and indispensable differences between both the individuals of a society and groups of individuals. And all of the contradictions imply social as well as mental and biological-physical differences and logics. Cf. the following *Model of Core Contradictions (Fig. 1)*.

Fig. 1: Model of Core Contradictions *(Bang & Døør)*

Ideo-logics   *Socio-logics*

SOCIAL PRAXIS ´ Core Contradictions

Race	**Class**	**Town-Country**
Age	**Authority**	**Private-Public**
Sex	**Ideology**	**Culture-Nature**

Bio-logics

It is important to make an alternative conception of the conditions for – and constraints of – language and communication, which neither considers homogeneity as the ideal condition or considers heterogeneity as separateness. It is important to realize that the different parts of a community or a biotope are interrelated and parts of the same entity. That means that

- We are members – *col-leagues* – of the same organism and in a deep way share the same identity.
- And each member, every single individuality, has its own identity, experiences, knowledge, purpose, viewpoint and standpoint <u>- and participates in the core contradictions.</u>

Language and communication exist in and between living individuals in living societies and surroundings. *Sharing* is a more vital characteristic of language and communication, than is *exchange.* We are sharing the language and the communication and the situations, and we do it from different positions and with different backgrounds and with individual identities and identifications. The point is that language and communication is more like an ecological process of living beings than a mechanical process of machines. Of course any individual and organism has its history, its habits, its traditions, its genetic conditions; and some members of the organism have a longer life and tradition in that organism than newcomers. And from the other viewpoint, an individual often knows more about its primary environment than about the new environment and conditions, e.g. we better know our mother tongue with which we have lived our first twenty years of lifetime than we know the language of the foreign country we afterwards emigrate to. From a dialectical point of view both parts will change; both the newcomer and the receiving community have to change in order to share and develop the ecological conditions. The relationship is a dialectical relation by which all the parts are interdependently related with each other and the whole entity is constituted by the dialectics of its parts.

How the process of integration is successfully established is today restricted by the contradiction between the economical and the ethical aspects of politics. It is a vital political task to formulate and discuss both the different ethical implications and the different kinds of economical models; so linguists – especially ecolinguists – have an important task to contribute to the knowledge of the linguistic and communicative conditions and implications for that sort of processes. In order to meet this challenge linguistics can be defined in the following way:

> **Linguistics** is the enquiry primarily concerned with descriptions of, and prescriptions for,
> - the phenomena of natural, living languages, and
> - their contextual and situational implications, i.e. their genetic and constitutional conditions and consequences.
>
> The linguistic research-object is defined as a complexity of living, natural, and cultural phenomena that constitute situations, and are constituted by situations, in their synchronic and diachronic dimensions. Languages cannot be isolated from their environments without which they don't exist. (Bang & Døør, 1998: 7)

This conception of linguistics differs from that of Chomsky and a lot of European structural linguistics; however the definition is in accordance with some of the formulations of e.g. John Lyons and Ludwig Wittgenstein. The great British linguist John LYONS summarised his brilliant survey of *Semantics* in the following way,

> […] Languages are learned and used in contexts which are in part determined by the variable assumptions and presuppositions of the people who use them; and these assumptions and presuppositions are not necessarily representable in terms of a set of determinable propositions. […] *modality*, as it operates in a good deal of everyday language-behaviour, cannot be understood, or properly analysed, otherwise than in terms of the *indexical* [*deictical*] and *instrumental functions of language,* to which its descriptive function is, at times if not always, subordinate. [My italics. jcb] (**LYONS** 1977:849)

In his famous book *Philosophical Investigations* (1958) Ludwig WITTGENSTEIN pointed out the relationship of languages and life forms,

> a)   [...] the speaking of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life. (PI §23).
> b)   To imagine a language means to imagine a form of life. (PI §19)
> c)   […] not agreement in opinions but in form of life (PI §241)
> d)   The common behaviour of mankind is the system of reference by means of which we interpret an unknown language (PI: §206).

It is interesting that Wittgenstein seems to distinguish between a specific language related with a special form of life and a potential for general language interpretation related with a "common behaviour of mankind". We could elaborate this important point in the following direction:

Languages are based upon human communication and the human needs and hopes for relating to each other, one self and the surroundings. Human beings share a lot of characteristics in spite of different cultures and specific languages. By learning and developing our mother tongue we are both creating a specific *language as a product* of our participation in the specific family and culture, and we are learning *the process of making languages* for human communication and mutual understanding. The child develops at least two important competences, the linguistic competence in a specific language and a general communicative competence implying the creation of common symbols and interpretations. People with different languages and cultures are engaged in mutual understanding and cooperation by means of using the specific and general communicative competence in order to create and interpret common symbols. Our training of linguistic awareness should explicitly imply our awareness of ecological communication, i.e. the awareness of both the common and the different languages and forms of life of the participants of the communication and the environment.

Linguists, teachers, and other agents of language politics, should be aware of the dialectics of communication and language, and should to a higher degree contribute to develop people's skills to contribute to conflict solution and mutual understanding, rather than trying to homogenize the linguistic systems and means.
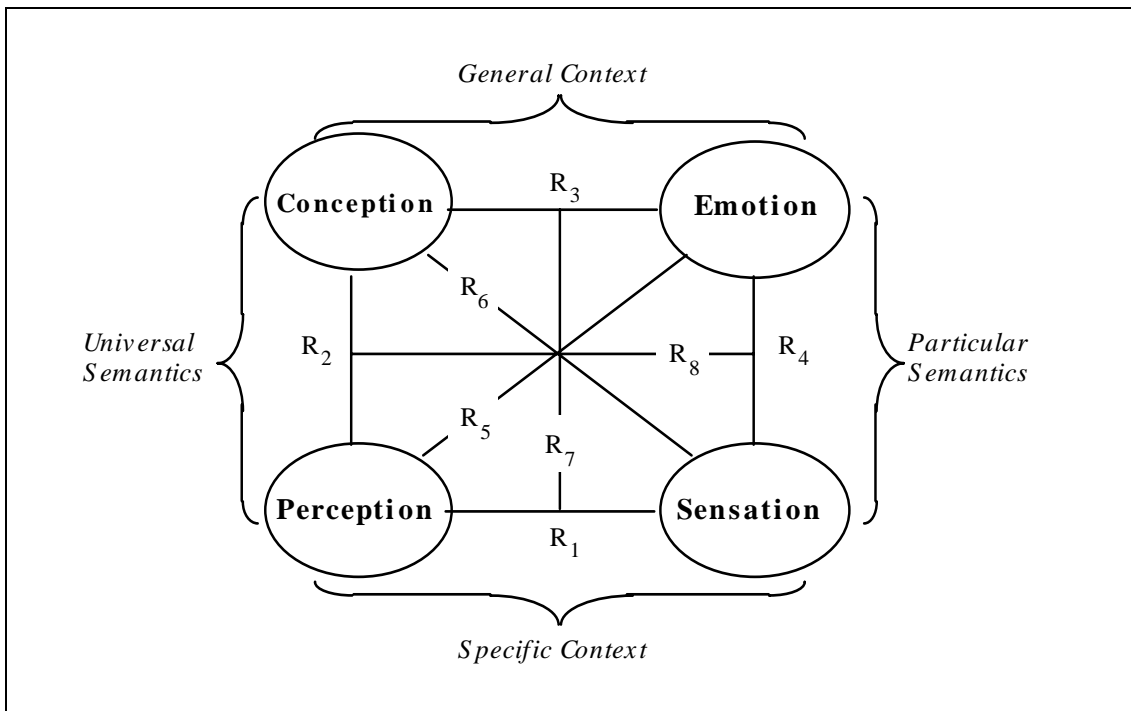
2. Experiences, cognition and language

We will examine a model of cognition in order to illustrate that even though language can be an important part of the communication, no language can fully express or transfer the different intentions and experiences of the participants. The participants are not identical to each other, and shall not be so, but we shall be able to establish sustainable and ecological relations to benefit for all the participants and the environment.

The model *(Fig. 2: Matrix of Cognition)* should illustrate the dialectics of four constituents of human cognition.

Fig. 2: Matrix of Cognition *(Bang & Døør)*

General Context

R_3

Conception   Emotion

R_6

Universal Semantics R_2 R_8 R_4 *Particular Semantics*

R_5

R_7

Perception   Sensation

R_1

Specific Context

The individual participates in the world and recognizes the surroundings and her-/him-self by **sensations** of the external world. The sensations are dialectically interrelated with emotions, perceptions and conceptions. That means that no sensation is independent from the feelings, the evaluations, or the categories of perceptions or the systems of concepts. We experience the surrounding world and ourselves – and our interrelations – partly by means of our senses; the sensations are of course dependent of the specific surroundings, the persons around us, the things, the artefacts, the plants, the animals, the colours, the fragrances, the taste, i.e. the objects and relations of our sensations.

Every individual has its specific sensations different from others, both because the individual is placed in specific places and times *(topos)* with specific surroundings, and because the individual is making sensations by means of individual senses with specific genesis and experiences. And the individual shares the surroundings and the general genetic and constitutive conditions of the sense apparatus with the other members of the species – the society in broader and narrower sense. Even the first sensations of a newborn individual depend upon both similar and different conditions; and no

individual has purely identical sensations with other individuals, and all individuals share some characteristics of the sensations. Each individual has its own deictic first person singular viewpoint *(I, me)* and shares situations with other individuals and the deictic first person plural *we, us;* and the individuals are able to share and shift the first, second and third position in relation to sensation of the subject-object relations.

All sensational data are realized in relation with **emotional** import and impact. There is a dialectical relation between the outer data and the inner feeling and evaluation of the data. The individual's need, joy, pain, love, aesthetic and ethic attitude towards and from the data are inseparable from the identification of the data. The individual identification of objects – persons, things, relations and relations of relations – depends upon the object-relations, the sensational apparatus, and the emotional significance and activity. The emotions dialectically depend upon the sensations, both the situational here and now and earlier sensations.

The emotions are vital for the individual as a part of the ecological balance system by which the individual knows its relations with other persons, things and relations, feeling the qualities, intentions and relevance.

The *emotional resonance* is an important and significant *recursive basis* for all of our intellectual interpretations, in a deep sense both our individual and collective interpretations. The emotional resonance is indispensable in human communication in order to understand each other, we tune according to each other, and our emotional resonance is important to identify both the harmonic and the conflicting attitudes and interests among the parts of the situation. Therefore it is a valuable part of our communicative competence to be able to identify the emotions implied in the communication, both our own and the others' and their interconnectedness and conditions for moving towards harmony.

Furthermore, all of our linguistic memory is interrelated with the emotional content of the situations through which we used and learned the language. That means that also our mental dictionary and grammar store emotional content that is inseparable from other parts of the cognitive content.

All of our **perceptions** depend upon our sensations and emotions and constitute a kind of categorisation system by which we organize, separate and identify the parts of the sensational and emotional flow. Of course each individual has its own experiences and ways of categorizing the experiences. And all of us have to coordinate our perceptions and perception systems to other persons' perceptions and perception systems in and by the way we communicate and live together with each other. There is no direct relation between the perceptions of two persons; the relationship is mediated by our living together and our communication with each other.

The **conceptions** - and the concepts and conception systems - are important parts of our cognitive processes and our linguistic systems and communication. And the conceptions as well as the concepts and conception systems are dialectically related with – depend upon – our individual and shared experiences from our perceptions, emotions and sensations.

The matrix of cognition illustrates the interdependency and interconnectedness between four parts of the processes of cognition and identification. It is important to realize that the conceptual and linguistic parts of our cognitive activity – including both identification and memory – depend upon the individual sensations, the individual emotions, and the individual perceptions. Because these activities and beings are individually specific and different from those of other individuals, it should follow that the concepts, too, are different from one person to another.

   The classic Saussure definition of the linguistic sign being constituted by two inseparable mental parts, i.e. the *'image acoustique'* and the *'concept'* (SAUSSURE 1972:28) might imply that the individual sign identification is individually specific and more or less different from other persons'. Saussure defined the more individual parts of language as *parole* in opposition to *la langue* which he characterized as being of a homogeneous nature – *de nature homogène*. The whole of both the individually different *parole* and the supposed homogeneous *la langue,* Saussure named – in accordance with standard French – *le langage* and it is of heterogeneous nature.

In this essay we will not discuss the different interpretations of Saussure's important thoughts on language and on the proper way of doing linguistics. However we will use his recognition of

- the inseparable unity of the individual and the social aspects of language,
- the heterogeneous nature of language,
- the individual language as both different from other individuals' and partly shared and similar.

We are interested in further developing this dialectics of language. The dialectical tradition is very different from e.g. the Louis Hjelmslev tradition of structural linguistics, which was interested in completely homogenization of the language as the object of linguistics. And the dialectical tradition is more close to some of the schools of *cognitive linguistics* - e.g. Lakoff and Johnson – even though some scholars seem to imply or postulate that the different individuals in a language society have one and the same *pictures* and *images* related with the words and sentences in the texts or discourse.

Even if we imply that the texts and discourses are within one shared language, the participants of the dialogue – speaker/writer, listener/reader, and third persons – will have different backgrounds and different positions in the dialogue, situation and surroundings.

All of us have different experiences as the *genetic* conditions for our conceptual processes and memories; and all of us have different *constitutive* conditions – interests, positions and charges etc. – in the situation in question.

The individual identity and identifications depend upon the dialectics of the genetic and constitutive conditions, implying bio-physical, mental and social dimensions.

This fact implies that two individuals cannot have identical concepts, but *similar* concepts. It is vital that we develop our individual concepts in a way that facilitate our social life; that means that from our birth and all over our lifetime we try to develop, organize and reorganize our concepts in order to share our experiences and cooperate with our friends – our social partners, our family etc. In a deep way our language could

be understood as our practical consciousness, i.e. our social consciousness by which our individual experiences becomes social and thereby conscious for ourselves (cf. Karl Marx).

Our concepts and conceptions are both individual and social, they differ from others' and they share important relations with other individuals; thereby they are more or less similar to the concepts and conceptions of others. Our concepts and conceptions are changing over life as they are deeply related with our communication with ourselves, other individuals and societies. This understanding of our conceptions implies that there is no linguistic competence that is independent from our communicative life and activities. The question of linguistic skills cannot be separated from the questions:

- With whom are you communicating about what and why? And
- Who or what decides the proper linguistic formulation of a situation, and who or what decides the proper interpretation of a text and discourse?

3. Conclusions and Invitations

The model of core contradictions (fig. 1) comprises some indispensable dialectical relationships in and by which we are living, learning, cooperating, communicating, etc. The matrix model of cognition (fig. 2) illustrates some more internal processes comprising four constituents that dialectically interrelates as well as the interrelations are dialectically related. Both models are examples of the dialectics of constituents and the relations of relations. It is important to underline that not only persons and things but equally relations are of ontological nature.

From a dialectical point of view there is no homogeneous language. In modern societies, however, there is a lot of homogenizing social formations, i.e. there are a lot of attempts to homogenise the ways of talking, writing, interpreting etc. As a matter of fact even the universities and schools operate *as if* a text or discourse has its own meaning, its proper interpretation regardless to whom has formulated it and whom it was addressed to in order to share with. In this construction the texts as well as the persons are treated *as if* they were parts of a machine operating by a restricted set of rules and codes. Generally, modern society tends towards treating everybody and

everything as if they were digital units and stereotypes, e.g. treat children as if they were grown ups and grown ups as if they were children. There is, too, a tendency to mix up the general and the particular.

From an ecolinguistic perspective it is important to treat a text or discourse so as to understand the intentions and relations of the persons involved in the situation of communication, or complexity of situations. We have to realize both the shared, similar and different uses of symbols and their related forms of life in order to identify, or create the conjuncture of potential meanings of that text/discourse and situation of communication. (Cf. the essay of my colleague Anna Vibeke Lindø on analysis of classroom dialogues, this volume).

In communication we use a lot of gestures, mimic and sign giving, more or less deliberately and consciously, more or less automatically and unconsciously – both in producing and interpreting the signs. In order to share symbols and understandings we have to share a common praxis. The common praxis is a reference for relevant and reliable *analogies* and *metaphors* by which we link the different languages, concepts and cultures significant and important for the persons involved in the communication. (In a way a language is a system of metaphors shared by a population of a shared eco-system, cf. Bang (2001) and Bay & Døør's essay in this volume.[1])

This understanding of both linguistic and communicative competence relates language and communication to the *persons and relations between persons* which are involved in communication. It is important to understand the linguist, too, as a part of the communication, including her or his relations. That means that the traditional question of *linguistic correctness* has to be replaced by the question of *the ecologically best practises of communication within and between biotopes, cultures and speech communities*.

That implies that we replace *language-as-law* or *rule system* with language as a *mode of human communication* constituted by the persons involved and their environment. We have critically to analyze the ways of using language in social control, and we have creatively to support the friendly and democratic dialogue everywhere in order to enhance peaceful solutions of conflicts – and in order to survive as a species.

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[1] Thanks to Jørgen Døør for comments to drafts of this essay.

I invite ecolinguists to further discussions, studies and development of the ecological paradigm for linguistics and communication. [2] Together with Jørgen Døør I have formulated the following proposal for the next step for Ecology and Language, Ecolinguistics:

The next steps up to AILA 2008 might be a revaluation and reformulation of the ecolinguistic project comprising:

- The theoretical matrices;
- The moral and political implications;
- The methodologies.

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[2] I want to thank the participants of the conference in Graz for the interesting discussions and very pleasant togetherness.