NOTES

**PART 8: Erasure**

These notes accompany part 8 of *The Stories We Live By: an online course in ecolinguistics,* and are based on chapter 8 of the Routledge book *Ecolinguistics: language, ecology and the stories we live by.*

**Introduction**

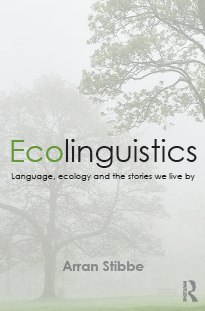
Machin and Mayr (2012, p. 5) describe being *critical* as ‘denaturalising the language to reveal the kinds of ideas, absences, and taken-for-granted assumptions in texts.’ Sometimes the absences in a text are as important as the ideas and assumptions that are actually present. *Erasure* is where stories in people’s minds treat something as unimportant, marginal, irrelevant or inconsequential.

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| Type of story  **8. ERASURE** | What it is  a story in people’s minds that something is unimportant or unworthy of consideration | What to look for  Erasure patterns, i.e., patterns of language which erase or background something in texts |
| Example: natural resources are unimportant. It hardly needs pointing out that the goods and services that consumers purchase do not simply materialise out of the blue. In large measure they have to be produced…The essential fact about production is so obvious that it hardly needs stating: it involves the use of services of various sorts to generate output…Clearly the manner in which production is organised has important social and political as well as economic aspects (*economics textbook*) | | |
| Example: nature is unimportant. Urban greenspace amenity, living and physical environments, environmental resources, the diversity of benthic habitats, seasonally grazed floodplains, aquatic habitat types, timber, biomass, assemblages of species (*from environmental reports*) | | |
| Example: animals are unimportant. The breeding sow should be thought of as, and treated as, a valuable piece of machinery whose function is to pump out baby pigs like a sausage machine (*Walls meat company*) | | |
| Discussion question: Which important areas of life tend to be erased in the texts that make up the culture we are part of? | | |

The story of erasure manifests itself linguistically when something that is present in reality is systematically suppressed, backgrounded or erased from language. Of key importance for ecolinguistics is the erasure of the natural world from texts of all kinds, from microeconomics textbooks to, perhaps surprisingly, ecological assessment reports. That is not the only concern, however. There is also the erasure of humans and social justice issues in environmental texts, which conveys a story that alleviation of poverty is not an important consideration in environmental action.

**Linguistic Features that Erase**

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| **Feature** | **Example (erasure of the natural world)** |
| **Hypernyms** | birds, mammals, fish, species, organisms, flora, fauna |
| **Mass nouns** | biomass, wood, 27 tonnes of biomass imports |
| **Abstractions** | biodiversity, ecosystem |
| **Metaphor** | terrestrial resources; natural capital; harvesting chickens |
| **Indirect associations** | living and physical environment, wetland habitat |
| **Grammatical embedding** | fish production, bird capture |
| **Passivation** | The farmers euthanized the piglets |
| **Morphological embedding** | fisheries |
| **Functionalization** | primary producers, dispersers, pollinating insects |

**Chapter summary**

Chapter 8 of *Ecolinguistics: language, ecology and the stories we live by.* (Stibbe: 2015)

This chapter examined erasure, which can be described as a story in people’s minds that an area of life is irrelevant, unworthy of consideration or unimportant. This underlying story is conveyed in texts when ‘something important’ that is present in reality is missing from texts which describe that reality. There are three main kinds of erasure: ‘the void’ where something important is completely missing from a text; ‘the trace’ where it is present but backgrounded; and ‘the mask’ where it is present but in a distorted form. What that ‘something important’ is depends on the ecosophy of the analyst, i.e., it is something that the analyst considers *should* be in the text but is missing. Some analysts are concerned about the erasure of social justice issues, indigenous populations, the local context and human agents from environmental discourse. Some are concerned about the erasure of tangible goods and services in the abstractions of financial discourse. And some are concerned about the absence of plants, animals and the ecosystems which support life across a range of discourses. The chapter described a number of linguistic techniques that exclude, background or distort an area of life, including abstraction, hyponymy, massification, agent deletion, metaphor and metonymy. These linguistic devices can cluster together in texts to form erasure patterns. Examples discussed included the complete erasure of the more-than-human world in economics texts, the partial erasure of animals and plants through the abstractions of ecosystem assessment reports, and the distortion of animals in agribusiness texts through metaphors which represent them as objects. Ecolinguistic analysis of erasure can serve two purposes. The first is highlighting that something of importance has been neglected in certain texts or discourses, bringing it to the attention of those who produce similar texts. The second is providing details of the linguistic techniques responsible for the erasure, making it possible to modify particular aspects of discourse in an effort to bring such areas of life back in to our minds.

**Glossary**

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| **Affected:** A participant in a clause who is having something done to them. Useful in analysing which participants are represented as powerless.  **Camera angle:** A high camera angle in a photograph is one where the camera is high up, looking down on the subject, whereas a low angle looks up at the subject. The camera angle can represent the subject as powerful (low angle) or powerless (high angle).  **Homogenisation:** The representation of individual entities as indistinguishable parts of a larger group, crowd or mass.  **Hyponymy:** A semantic relationship where several words are represented as equivalent by virtue of all being examples of the same thing. (e.g. in the expression *commodities such as fish, grains and timber* the hyponyms *fish*, *grains* and *timber* are represented as being equivalent in as much as all are *commodities*). Useful in seeing how a text sets up relationships of equivalence.  **Impersonalisation:** The act of representing a social actor as a replaceable member of a category rather than a unique individual. Useful for investigating erasure.  **Mask:** A form of erasure where an entity has been omitted from a text or discourse and replaced by a distorted version of itself.  **Metonymy:** Calling something not by its own name but by something associated with it (e.g. cooking method for type of chicken in *broiler* or *roaster*).  **Nominalisation:** A noun phrase which can be thought of as derived from an underlying process (e.g. *destruction* derives from *X destroys Y*). Useful in investigating erasure since both X and Y can be omitted in the nominalised form.  **Participants:** The living beings, physical objects, places, times or abstract entities that appear in a clause or image.  **Passivation:** Participants are passivated when they are represented as having something done to them rather than actively doing or thinking things. Useful in investigating which participants are backgrounded in a text.  **Passive voice:** A grammatical form such as ‘Y is destroyed by X’ as opposed to the active voice ‘X destroys Y’. Useful in investigating the erasure of participants since the passive voice allows the participant X to be omitted.  **Re-minding:** Explicitly calling attention to the erasure of an important area of life in a particular text or discourse, and demanding that it be brought back into consideration.  **Suppression:** The omission or backgrounding of a particular participant in a clause (e.g. the clause *The chickens were slaughtered* suppresses the actor who does the slaughter).  **Trace:** A form of erasure where an entity is represented in a text or discourse but is obscured or backgrounded.  **Void:** A form of erasure where an entity is entirely absent from a text or discourse. |

**References and Further Reading**

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*These notes draw brief extracts from Stibbe (2015: p.183-188), and glossary items from Stibbe (2015: p.200-207). Data examples are from the Ecolinguistics Text Collection* ([www.storiesweliveby.org.uk/references](http://www.storiesweliveby.org.uk/references)).

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| **Extract**  From: Stibbe, Arran (2012) Today we live without them: the erasure of animals and plants in the language of ecosystem assessment. [*ECOS: a review of conservation*](http://www.banc.org.uk/ecos/)33:1:47-53  *This extract examines the erasure of the natural world in the* Synthesis of the Key Findings *report from the UK National Ecosystem Assessment*  In his famous essay *Why look at animals?* John Berger made a poignant and controversial statement: “In the last two centuries animals have gradually disappeared. Today we live without them” (Berger 1980). There is little doubt that when Berger made this statement, and even more so today, interactions with animals happen increasingly at a distance: mediated by nature programs, cartoons, logos, museums, books, soft toys, and social media with its innumerable videos of amusing animal antics. Jonathan Burt is critical of the historical accuracy of Berger’s account but still agrees that:  The historical trajectory [Berger] outlines of the disappearance of animals and their replacement by signs, and the manner in which humans and animals are increasingly alienated in modernity, provides a pessimistic vision with which it is hard to argue. (Burt 2005:203)  Randy Malamud is also critical of Berger, arguing that representations of animals can be positive (Malamud 1998) - we can still live with animals in our heads through reading or viewing evocative descriptions, even without direct contact with them. Berger’s statement that ‘we live without them’ is clearly an exaggeration for rhetorical effect, and something that is more or less true for different groups of people in different situations. For this article I am going to choose a very specific situation: a man or woman is sitting at a desk reading the UK National Ecosystem Assessment, in a room with strip-lighting and no windows. Ecosystems are, of course, teaming with life, with humans, animals and plants living their lives and interacting with each other and the physical environment in ways that sustain all life. The question is whether the reader of the report is living with or without animals and plants while reading it. Clearly their mind is interacting with signs in an artificial environment, but are those signs evocative enough to allow them to visualise the people, animals, plants and natural environments that make up the ecosystems?  **Analysis**  There is an assumption behind the analysis that I am about to carry out, and one that the UK National Ecosystem Assessment (NEA 2011) explicitly agrees with. That ‘birds of all kinds, butterflies, trees such as oak, beech and birch, mammals such as badgers, otters and seals’…are of “great cultural significance” and “undoubtedly have a huge hold over the popular imagination” (p19). A great many people care about the wellbeing, welfare and lives of the other animals and plants who make their homes in the UK, and that this can be a powerful force in motivating them to protect the ecosystems that all life needs for continuing survival. There may even be ‘policymakers’ who care. But does the form of language used in the National Ecosystem Assessment encourage them to visualise and respect the animals and plants who make up ecosystems? Or does it paint a lonely picture of humans living in the UK by themselves, surrounded not by other species living their own lives for their own purposes but instead by ‘terrestrial resources’, ‘natural capital’ and ‘cultural amenity providers’? Does it paint a picture of people whose concern is solely focused on prosperity and human wellbeing without a moment’s consideration of the wellbeing and lives of other species?  I am going to analyse the discourse of the 87 page *Synthesis of the Key Findings* report from the UK National Ecosystem Assessment as a representative sample of a discourse which goes far wider than this one document, appearing in the other documents that form the UK NEA as well as similar reports such as the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment. For the purposes of this article, the term *discourse* refers to a specific way of using language which encodes a particular worldview. For example, while there may be no exact sentences that the NEA and MEA have in common, they both use the same discourse, i.e., they employ the same ways of talking about the world based on the same (or a very similar) worldview. Through analysing the ways of using language in a discourse it is possible to reveal the worldview that underlies it, and expose it for questioning. The *Synthesis of the Key Findings* report (2011), which I will refer to for convenience as simply ‘the NEA’, was chosen since of all the NEA documents it is the one that policymakers and the public are most likely to read and be influenced by.  A starting point in the analysis is to ask ‘where are the animals and plants’ in the discourse of the NEA? In the statement ‘birds of all kinds, butterflies, trees such as oak, beech and birch, mammals such as badgers, otters and seals’ (p19) the trees and animals exist within the sentence quite directly through the presence of their species names. This is the most concretely imaginable or ‘basic level’ of representation, with anything above the basic level, such as ‘mammal’ or ‘invertebrate’ being less likely to result in vivid mental images (Lakoff and Johnson 1990). Photographs, of course, convey images directly, and the photographs and images which accompany the text show people walking in beautiful countryside with trees, a dragonfly, a cow, and close up shots of individual birds. This direct and immediate form of representation, however, only occurs occasionally in the NEA. For much of the rest of the document, I am going to argue that animals and plants have been *erased.*  Erasure occurs when beings in the real world are represented by, or replaced by, signs in text. What is erased (from readers’ minds) is the unique nature and complexity of the beings being represented. Nothing about the word ‘oak’ conveys the myriad of shapes of the actual trees, their colours, smells, textures or the intricacy of their forms. Following Jean Baudrillard I will treat erasure as a matter of degree – some forms of language convey more vivid and evocative images of beings while others erase them almost completely. Representations can be anywhere on a scale of “the reflection of a profound reality” to “no relation to any reality whatsoever” (Baudrillard 1994: 10).  Erasure does not just mean an absence of animals and plants in a text. For instance, Allen Williams *et al* found that animals and nature have simply disappeared from many recent children’s books, and the environmental charity ABC noticed that nature vocabulary such as ‘beaver’ and ‘dandelion’ disappeared from the Oxford Junior dictionary to be replaced with technological vocabulary such as ‘blog’ and ‘broadband’ (ABC 2008). Instead erasure means that animals and plants are present in a text but in a distant and diminished form, remaining only as traces.  The mildest form of erasure occurs when animals and plants are replaced by species names such as ‘oak’ (p19), ‘badger’ (p19), ‘halibut’ (p30), ‘trout and salmon’ (p32), or their movements are frozen in two dimensional, enframed photographs. Then there are more abstract representations when a hypernym replaces the species name – ‘*birds* and *mammals*’ (p23), ‘nursery grounds for *fish*’ (p23), ‘a loss of *species*’ (p4), ‘*organisms*...provide us with food’ (p7), and progressively more abstract until we get to ‘native *flora* and *fauna*’ (p48). And the complex and contested term ‘biodiversity’ used throughout the report is far, far up the scale of abstraction. These terms at least remain within the semantic domain of living beings, but when animals and plants find themselves as hyponyms of ‘our resources’ (p53), ‘the UK’s natural capital’ (p47) or ‘terrestrial, marine and freshwater resources’ then they are part of a larger semantic domain, lumped together with physical resources such as oil, water or sand. As Norman Fairclough points out, items which are co-hyponyms are represented as being equivalent in some way, draining the life and individuality from animals and plants by making them part of a long list of resources (Fairclough 2003).  Then there are representations which contain traces of animals and plants by mentioning the places where they live, but not the dwellers themselves: ‘urban greenspace amenity’ (p51) includes trees and plants as the merest of traces in the ‘green’ of ‘greenspace’; ‘living and physical environments’ (p4) and ‘environmental resources’ (p32) represent animals and plants as part of an all-encompassing environment surrounding humans; ‘wild habitat’ (p5) and ‘wetland habitat’ (p24) represent what Chris Philo and Chris Wilbert call ‘beastly places’ (Philo and Wilbert 2000), though without the beasts. Likewise ‘seasonally grazed floodplains’ (p23) contains a trace of animals, for who else is doing the grazing, and a hint of plants, for what else is being grazed. The word ‘types’ takes the erasure up a level in expressions such as ‘aquatic habitat types’ (p10).  Moreover, animals and plants are erased when they are referred to metonymically by the function they are serving within an ecosystem: ‘pollinators’, ‘primary producers’, ‘dispersers’, or the slightly more vivid ‘pollinating insects’ (p19). These at least are count nouns, suggesting a multitude of individuals, but in the expressions ‘wood and non-woody biomass’ (p18) and ‘27 million tonnes per year of additional biomass imports’, trees and plants are represented as mass nouns, as mere tonnages of stuff.  Fish are erased as they take the place of a modifier in a noun phrase, for example ‘fish stocks’ (p8), ‘fish catches’ (p10), ‘catch rates of fish’ (p31), ‘fishing technology’ (p55), or ‘landings of marine fish’ (p2). When fish are modifiers of other nouns, they have been pushed to the periphery, the sentence being about something else. And the erasure is taken even further with the expression ‘fisheries’, where the fish themselves remain in the morphology of the word, but exist as just a trace within a large commercial operation.  **References**  ABC (2008) *Removal of Nature Words from Dictionary Causes Uproar*. http://www.gettingkidsoutdoors.org/removal-of-nature-words-from-dictionary-causes-uproar/  Baudrillard, J. (1994) *Simulacra and simulation.* University of Michigan Press  Berger, J. (1980) *About looking.* New York: Vintage  Burt, J. (2005) John Berger's "Why Look at Animals?": A Close Reading. *Worldviews: Global Religions, Culture, and Ecology*. 9:2:203-218.  Fairclough, N. (2003) *Analysing Discourse: Textual analysis for social research.* London: Routledge  Lakoff, G. and M. Johnson. 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