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Discourses of ecotourism: the case of Fraser Island, Queensland

Peter Mühlhäusler *, Adrian Peace

Departments of Linguistics and Anthropology, University of Adelaide, Adelaide, Australia

Abstract

The importance of language in the changing usage of particular environments is a topic worthy of greater attention than hitherto. Fraser Island has passed through a period of intense political conflict to one in which it is dominated by the new discourse of ecotourism. It is now part of that global development in which it is claimed that tourists can become properly informed about, and become particularly sensitive to, the complex and the fragile nature of the places which they visit. In this paper, which concentrates on the discourse of ecotours and whale watching, it is argued that such claims fall a long way short of being realised in one of Australia's prime ecotourism destinations. © 2001 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

The rapidly growing literature about language and environment (summarised in Harré et al., 1999) places considerable emphasis on the conflicting linguistically constructed perceptions of environmental matters. Although much less attention has been given to the post-conflict phase, an analysis of this seemingly less exciting stage leads to new and more subtle discourses about the environment.

Our choice of an island for this study is not accidental. As has been illustrated by Grove (1995), modern environmentalist discourse began when European scientists became aware of the impact of European colonisation on vulnerable tropical island environments, and islands continue to be at the centre of environmental research. Whereas religious, philosophical and scientific ideas have been discussed extensively in environmental history, language has only recently received attention (see Mühlhäusler, 1996, 1999; Mühlhäusler and Peace, 1999; Peace, 2001). A central aim of this paper is to redress this imbalance.

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +61-8-8303-5638; fax: +61-8-8303-5241.

E-mail address: pmuhlhau@hotmail.com (P. Mühlhäusler).

This paper focuses on Fraser Island, situated 190 km north of Brisbane, and on Kingfisher Bay, the island's principal resort. In the 1970s and 1980s the island gained international attention as a particularly attractive and unique location that was endangered by loggers and sand miners. By 1991, all exploitative industries had been stopped and the island was declared a World Heritage Area and National Park with ecotourism as its only utility.¹ In our paper, we shall explore to what extent the perceived salvation of Fraser Island is a linguistic construction by comparing a range of promotional and educational materials with observed ecotouristic events.

2. Method

As pointed out by a number of writers (Mühlhäusler, forthcoming; Fill, 1993), ecolinguistics does not wish to restrict itself to a single method but rather sees its main task in bringing together perspectives from a range of disciplines and subdisciplines. In this particular case, field research was carried out jointly by an anthropologist and a linguist; therefore, it seemed profitable to work within an ethnography of communication approach of a Hymesian kind (Hymes, 1972, 1974; Saville-Troike, 1982).

Hymes (1972, 1974) will be supplemented with more recent ecolinguistic approaches to textual analysis, with particular focus on environmental metaphor, the carving up of topological and people space by means of pronouns,² and attention to transitivity and agency.

We will begin by analysing our subject matter in terms of the macro-categories of the situation — event and act — and then concentrate a more detailed microanalysis on subcomponents of communicative events. The limitation of the Hymesian method is that it is rather mechanical and entirely etic. Its strengths are that it directs the fieldworker's attention to a wide range of potentially significant phenomena, and that the results of this method can be readily compared with etic findings from other domains or by other fieldworkers. In our conclusions, we have tried to make suggestions for an emic interpretation of the discourses analysed.

2.1. *The situation—Fraser Island 1998—World Heritage Area*

By situation we mean “the context in which communication occurs” (Saville-Troike, 1982, p. 28), or in our specific case both the temporal-historical and the specific physical factors that situate ecodiscourses. The discourses about Fraser Island are manifestations of global environmentalism at the end of the 20th century, for it is visited and watched by ecologists and tourists from around the world.

While we will identify etic parameters of communicative events below, an etic approach to the overall situational context is not feasible. In any case, there are a number of excellent accounts of the geology, flora, fauna and Aboriginal occupation of this island (Evans, 1991; Baverstock, 1985).

¹ General remarks about the language of ecotourism can be found in Purnell (1996).

² An example is Taylor and Buttel (1992, p. 406) “We know we have global environmental problems, in part, because we act as if we were a unitary and not a differentiated ‘we’”.

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