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**Language and the world: Some perspectives on  
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## Language and the world: Some perspectives on impact linguistics

Alwin Frank Fill. 2010. *The Language Impact. Evolution – System – Discourse*. Sheffield: Equinox.

### 1. Introduction

Alwin Frank Fill is the author of both standard reference works, such as *Ökolinquistik. Eine Einführung* (1993), and a number of studies, e.g. *Language, Signs and Nature* (2008). He also coedited volumes such as *Colourful Green Ideas* (2002) and *Sustaining Language* (2007).

In the monograph under review, Fill shifts his focus to what he calls *Impact Linguistics* (1). He uses this term to cover various branches of linguistics, dealing with the manifold effects of language upon the world. With regard to the target audience of undergraduate students of English linguistics, this monograph stands in line with Fill's introductory works, but offers a variety of topics related to a much wider spectrum of linguistic disciplines.

One of Fill's aims is to show "in what way and to what extent language [...] has left its imprint on this earth" (p. 2). As vague as this objective may appear, so is his understanding of *impact* "as the force exerted by a new idea, concept, technology, or ideology" (p. 1; the same wording recurs in App. I, 227 and is quoted from *Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* 1996). Following further elaborations, one gains a better understanding of Fill's application of this term's concept and learns that *impact* is closely related to the uses, functions and effects of language.

Fill's second aim is to present an overview of the most prominent and relevant philosophic and (socio)linguistic thinkers on the topic of language impact (p. 2). Finally, it is his highly personal and idealistic endeavour to make "students of language avoid the fallacy of blaming on language all the problems of the world (conflicts of various kinds, war, racism, unequal treatment of the genders, environmental problems, etc.)" (p. 201) that Fill is seeking to pursue with his work.

### 2. A brief summary of contents

As the title of his book reveals, Fill divides 21 chapters into three major sections in which he presents the impact of language upon the world by putting language as a "construing force" (p. 110) into different frames. The main arguments and Fill's technique of approach shall be presented selectively and discussed in the following.

## 2.1 “*The Impact of Speech on a Planet*” (pp. 5-36)

In part I, bearing the striking subtitle *A ‘Meteorite’ Hits the Earth*, Fill covers the diachronic evolvement of language as well as of linguistics from 2.5 million years ago to the onset of the *Linguistic Turn*, thereby providing a brief overview on the phylogenetic factors, starting with the causes and effects of potential origins of the human language (e.g. *gossip hypothesis* by Power 1998). Then he goes on to present the most prominent functional models of language (Bühler 1934; Jakobson 1960; Halliday 1973) from „the impact point of view“, i.e. the effect of language on the world in terms of how the use of it changes people’s views and influences or even directs their actions.

Lastly for part I, Fill provides his readers with a recapitulation of 2500 years of linguistic historiography condensed into three pages (pp. 30-32), with examples substantiating his central idea of language impact and special focus upon the notions of language use as understood by (language) philosophers from Heraclitus to Wittgenstein (*use with regard to the effects of language*) and Chomsky (*use related to the “right use” of language*) (pp. 33ff.).

## 2.2 “*The Impact of Language as a System*” (pp. 37-110)

Part II discusses language impact in terms of language as a system – i.e. as consisting of phonemic, morphemic and lexical items combined to form grammatical structures – shaping human thought, human actions and, consequently, human relations (p. 37). Again, Fill provides a historical panoply of distinguished names and ideas, ranging from Neo-Humboldtians, Phenomenologists, Structuralists and Anthropologists to Linguistic Determinism, and describes the practical aspects of each of the approaches presented. This is followed by a compact diachronic review of scepticism of language and linguistic criticism in Chapter 6, again starting from Ancient Greece and leading to the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Chapters 7 and 8 deal with language impact in *General Semantics* and *Linguistic Constructivism*. Fill provides a few basic insights into the views of Halliday and Fairclough (representing vs. construing vs. constructing, p. 94) and then proceeds by sketching the sexuality debate as well as the ways in which gender-specific language and language on gender affect human thinking, society and how they define the traditional social roles for (men and) women (99). He correctly observes that “we have to imagine a bidirectional interaction between language and society, in which it is impossible to say whether language mirrors social changes or triggers them” (p. 110). A brief, apposite section is appended on the term and concept of *political correctness*, pointing out its ambiguity as it “has increasingly been used to mean free from sexism, although its general usage has come to imply ‘paying

excessive attention to the sensibilities of those who are seen as different from the norm” (p. 101).

Finally, Fill includes some general aspects of the field of *Cognitive Linguistics*, focusing on the impact of metaphor and framing, referring to leading figures such as Goatly (2007) as well as Lakoff and Johnson (1980).

### **2.3 “The Impact of Discourse on the World”** (pp. 111-199)

Part III of Fill’s monograph deals with the impact of language as *discourse*, which, as a term, is used quite comprehensively, namely “in all the senses mentioned by Fairclough, viz. **written** and **spoken** manifestations of ‘language’ which may, but need not be restricted to an individual text” (p. 113 [original emphasis]). Fill goes on: “In this volume, there will be no separation of verbal from non-verbal effects. Let it suffice to say that by ‘Discourse’ we mean **written** as well as **spoken** discourse and that with spoken discourse the combination between verbal and non-verbal elements (supportive or contradictory) must always be taken into consideration” (p. 114 [original emphasis]).

This rather broad definition of discourse is followed by three detailed chapters on the key figures, topics and approaches in *Pragmatics*, which are supplemented by numerous references to both introductory and foundational works, such as by Bühler (1934), Wittgenstein (1953), Austin (1962), Searle (1969, 1979) and Grice (1975). Moreover, he provides an interesting selection of insights into language impact from a therapeutical, humorous and forensic point of view as subtopics.

In Chapter 15, Fill attends to the impact of texts, using

‘text’ to mean a specific unit of discourse or, in accordance with the definition of De Beaugrande [sic!] and Dressler (1981: 3) ‘a communicative occurrence which meets seven standards of textuality’, or [...] in David Crystal’s definition (1997: 438): ‘a stretch of spoken or written language with a definable communicative function (news report, poem, road sign, etc.)’ (p. 129).

In the absence of both definitional precision and the usual works of reference cited, it is the section on *The Impact of the Internet* (15.1) which discusses specific “text-types and text uses” (p. 130) that deserves a closer look: When it comes to the rather new text types generated by “the invention of the internet” (p. 130), we will find that Fill’s remarks as well as the literary references, which do not date later than 2006, are rather scarce. Furthermore, recently much-disputed terms like *internet* or *domain* are left undefined (and

unglossed).<sup>1</sup> Fill's suggestion that "through the internet, the impact of language [...] has reached a stage where language fulfils a new function: [namely that of] the unification of the human species and the globalization of cultural developments" (p. 133), speaks well for the relevance of the internet for the subject of language impact.

Chapter 16 is concerned with discourse ethics, on the one hand, and approaches to the extensions of *dialogue*, on the other hand. In section 16.1 (which is followed by Chapter 17 and, hence, is missing section 16.2), Fill delineates the terms *dialogue* and *discussion*<sup>2</sup> (following Bohm 1996: chapter 2), and arrives at a truism by explaining that a dialogue "welds people together and makes the free flowing of opinions and a new understanding possible", whereas the term discussion is used when "different views are analysed critically, frequently with a winner and a loser emerging" (p. 138). "In dialogue", on the contrary, "all participants are winners" (p. 138). On top of this rather trivial definition, the reader is given an incorrect etymology of the Latin *discutere* (138).<sup>3</sup>

Chapter 17, which explains various types and categories of discourse strategies (cf. Reisigl and Wodak 2001: 44ff.), continues in this vein, also containing a few terminological inaccuracies. For instance, Fill refers to quotations as „purely formal elements“ of linguistic strategies (p. 139), which is a crude over-simplification given the recent pragmatic approaches to the study of quoting (e.g. Bublitz and Hübler 2007 and Cappelen and Lepore 2007). Fill even seems to be contradicting himself, when he suggests that „certain strategic elements tend to be linked 'forever' with certain personages, like Martin Luther King's 'I have a dream' and Lincoln's 'of the people, by the people, for the people'“ (p. 139), thus recognizing the quotation as a strategy, rather than merely a formal element.

Under *Critical Discourse Analysis* (henceforth CDA, Chapter 18), Fill compiles various opinions, with numerous illustrative examples by language philosophers on the influences of effective language usage on ideologies and powers, though he is careful to give them a balanced treatment by adding a few points of critique against CDA. A short subchapter on the consequences of misunderstanding and mistranslation (18.4) is then inserted, with Fill explaining in rather general terms that "misunderstanding can occur on all levels of

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<sup>1</sup> See J. Arendholz (2011: 10-15) for a discussion of the term *internet*. Another work of relevance is: B. Danet and S. C. Herring (2007). Furthermore, studies dealing with various internet-specific text genres are the following by S. Nowson (2006), J. Giltrow and D. Stein (2009) and C. Puschmann (2010). For the particular language characteristics of internet-specific text types, see C. Hoffmann (2010) and G. Myers (2009).

<sup>2</sup> Both terms are not listed in Appendix I.

<sup>3</sup> lat. *discutere* v. is composed of the prefix *dis-* and the verb *quatere* (pp. *dis-cussum*), not "cutere", as Fill states (138), which did not exist as a free lexical morpheme (cf. Georges 1998).

language”, i.e. intralinguistically as well as cross-linguistically (p. 163). He cites Chernobyl as an example for how a simple misunderstanding between two operators could lead to a nuclear disaster (p. 163f.).

The many subdivisions of Chapter 20, bearing the rather broad heading *Interaction between Language and World*, first discuss the distinction between the face models of Goffman (1967: 5) and Brown and Levinson (1987: 13). Then – for no apparent reason – follow observations on “ecological” and “unecological” elements in the language system as well as the phenomenon of anthropocentric language and its consequences.

### 3. Résumé

It should be quite evident that in discussing and exploring language impact, Fill’s references to so many (linguistic) ramifications necessarily allow only for an elementary outline of the varied related linguistic disciplines. On the upside, this work may well serve as a very useful springboard for further research into the areas of discourse and pragmatics – at least for those who will not have themselves distracted by the unconventional structuring of Fill’s work. The reader is provided with numerous and valuable references for further reading and will certainly find the author’s mnemonic devices a useful means for processing the many pieces of information compiled in *The Language Impact*. Fill even offers enhanced readability and facilitates orientation by closing each of the three parts with a concise summary. In addition, he highlights numerous cue words throughout his work, though this is done rather unsystematically.<sup>4</sup> His way of sectioning chapters and subchapters tends to be, at times, equally inconsistent.<sup>5</sup>

The attached glossaries – one listing key terms (App. I, 224-228), the second one containing key names of linguists mentioned in this book (App. II, 229-248) and the third one displaying further examples (App. III, 249-252) – provide the reader with additional portions of essential information in a format reminiscent of a dictionary. Whereas Appendix II features the most prominent creators of the models and theories mentioned by Fill, Appendix I seems unbalanced, consisting of very sketchy explanations of both foundational terms like *discourse*, *metaphor* and *pragmatics* (which were already defined and well explained in

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<sup>4</sup> What is to be gained for the reader by putting in bold face both the central terms and names of key figures, on the one hand, and rather common phrases, such as “**one’s own language** [...] **norm**” und “**English linguistics**” (79) remains obscure.

<sup>5</sup> See e.g. the intermediate, unnumbered titles “Inferential Pragmatics”, “Conversation Analysis” and “Deixis” in Chapter 14, before even launching subchapters 14.1 ff. Another sequence of intransparent titles and sections is found on pp. 144ff.

the respective sections) and other more specific technical terms such as *biodiversity*; yet sorely missing in this list is the one most frequently (and diversely) used term in this book, namely that of *language*.<sup>6</sup> One is left wondering what purpose this certainly well-intended composite glossary is meant to serve.

These shortcomings notwithstanding, readers of Fill's work will doubtlessly benefit from the highly descriptive presentation of facts and extensive examples. The rich panorama of the various fields of linguistics will provide a sound understanding of the basic principles of each discipline, serving readers as valuable points of departure for further exploring their particular fields of interest.

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<sup>6</sup> Greek philosophers and their terminology seem to have gained Fill's particular interest, who unfortunately handles them with some degree of inaccuracy. For example, he refers to one of Aristotle's works by the Latin *De Interpretatione* (75), a title which was only applied by its 5th/6th century translator Boethius.

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