

# Onomatopoeia as Signs of Naturalness: Semiotics on the Language and Environment Nexus

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“Nature interpretation” is an activity largely practiced in the field of environmental education and its goal is commonly understood as “bridging between humans and non-humans”. The present paper examines nature interpretation as a discourse of environmentalism and reveals how it enacts “natural” space-time with the use of onomatopoeia and diminutives and its ritualized discursive structure namely based on the Jakobsonian semiotic insight on poetic languages (Jakobson, 1960). In other words, the paper recognizes “nature” as a social fact and reveals what type of nature is discursively textualized through forms and other linguistic elements of discourse. The narrative data analyzed in the paper was collected in the eco-institute located in Yamanashi prefecture, Japan, in 2006 (Asai, 2015).

First, the paper investigates how nature interpretation consists of highly stylized discourse through multi-layered poetic structures in three aspects: (1) the nature interpreter’s linguistic description of animals using onomatopoeia and other diminutives, (2) mimicry or impersonation of animals with the use of emphatic bodily movements, and (3) the entire discourse structure constructed in a series of segments throughout the nature interpretation program. Second, the paper examines the process in which nature interpretation poetically or iconically mediates the deictic center of the communicative event (i.e., “here-and-now”) and its context outside the immediate surrounds of communication (i.e., “there-and-then”). This allows nature interpretation to achieve at least three tasks: (1) to metaphorically evoke the notion and sense of “mother nature”, (2) to vividly enact a ‘direct / physical / bodily’ experience with nature, and (3) to ritualize the entire interaction structured around the forest and the participants’ experience through nature interpretation. For such analysis, the paper employs an overview of Du Bois’ arguments regarding the relationship between quotation in language use and shamanistic interaction, which schematizes the correlation between “linguistic and behavioural features” and “the categories of speech” with the notion of context dependency (Du Bois, 1986).

Based on this analysis, the paper demonstrates that nature interpretation presupposes the dichotomy of humans and non-humans (culture and nature), and in turn ideologically mediates, i.e., epitomizes the “bridge”, between such contrastively conceptualized spheres by creating ritualized space-time. In other words, it points out that nature emerges as a particular type of concept and is experienced through a particular form of discourse. It also indicates that the association of and the use of onomatopoeias with nature is not ‘natural’, but ‘naturalizing’; that is to say such association is ideological in the environmental discourse. They are ‘naturalizing’ in the sense that they appear as motivated, non-arbitrary, thus ‘natural’ signs. Finally, the paper suggests that while this environmental ritual effectively creates direct experience with nature by evoking the sense of a lost, pre-modern mythical paradise of nature for the participants here-and-now, this intentionally ritualized and “naturalized” use of language, is a distinct sign of post-modern environmentalism, as manifested in the persona of the nature interpreter and her/his speech acting.

## References

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