We Are not to Judge How People Should Speak
Interview with professor Zoltán Kövecses

ABSTRACT

The interview was conducted during the Megatrends and Media 2018 – Reality and Media Bubbles conference organised by the Faculty of Mass Media Communication at the University of SS. Cyril and Methodius in Trnava in April 2018 as the professor was one of the main plenary speakers at the conference. The interview focuses on the language of new media, and the Internet in particular, and the use of technologies from the professor's point of view. It deals with ongoing simplification and liberalisation trends in society and language as well as with the development within linguistics characterised by the shift from prescriptivism to descriptivism and their possible reflection in the new media and in education. It introduces the tendencies of intertextuality and informalisation that are typical for the language of the media today.

KEY WORDS

Language. Language development. Linguistics. Simplification. The Internet.

Zoltán Kövecses
Department of American Studies,
School of English and American Studies,
Eötvös Loránd University
Rákóczi út. 5,
1088 – Budapest
Hungary

Zoltán Kövecses is Professor of Linguistics in the Department of American Studies at Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest. In 1982-83, he worked on his Ph.D. in the Linguistics Department of the University of California at Berkeley. He is one of the editors of the international scholarly journal, Metaphor and Symbol and he also serves on the advisory board of Cognitive Linguistics and several other international journals. He is also working as a lexicographer and is the author of several Hungarian-English and English-Hungarian dictionaries. He has taught at several American and European universities. He has lectured widely at various international conferences and has received several scholarships, awards and grants. He is currently working on the language and conceptualisation of emotions, cross-cultural variation in metaphor and the issue of the relationship between language, mind, and culture from a cognitive linguistic perspective. His major books include Metaphor and Emotion. Language, Culture and Body in Human Feeling (2000), Language, Mind and Culture (2006), Metaphor, A Practical Introduction (2010), Ten Lectures on Figurative Meaning-making: the Role of Body and Context (2012), Where Metaphors Come From. Reconsidering Context in Metaphor (2015), and dictionaries: Unabridged Hungarian-English Dictionary (1998), A Dictionary of Hungarian Slang (2009), Hungarian-English Idiom Dictionary (2010).

František Rigo (F. R.): What is the language of the media like? How do you perceive it? Is it possible to generalize it somehow at all?

Zoltán Kövecses: At first, that´s a book-length question. I have never specifically worked on the language of the media, although for many of my books and papers the data came from media language, especially British and American newspapers and magazines. I have a special interest in metaphor and my primary dealing with media language was to do research on metaphor in media language. On that basis, of course, I also had another non-professional interest as a citizen of a country, in this respect it doesn´t really matter which country, but it happens to be Hungary and I am interested in the issue of how much you can rely on the media and media language, which is much broader than reading particular newspapers, it includes many other things, as people involved in media studies know much better than I do. The major general point about media language, as I look at it both from professional and non-professional perspectives, is that there is no media language without a large amount of framing, that is, looking at whatever you are looking at from a particular perspective. Everybody, all journalists, all reporters handle whatever they are working on from a particular perspective because our conceptual system doesn´t allow for anything else.

F. R.: I ask about what the language of media is like in connection with the rise of the Internet as a medium. Based on the rise of the power of the Internet one might have the impression that the language of the media, especially the language used on the Internet, is moving away from properly structured journalistic language, which has got some rules. It seems that the language of the media, at least as far as the Internet is concerned, is getting closer to the language of Internet users.

Zoltán Kövecses: I think it is a perfectly good observation and from what I have seen from my students, that seems to be correct because very often they use the conventional signs, which are probably international or almost universal, in their daily interactions and that is unthinkable for me personally because other than writing emails and other than sometimes sending SMS messages I am not really involved in or with that kind of media language. I am not on Facebook or any other social network, I think it is too time consuming. Sometimes I find that my doing research and thus making so much use of the computer is already very time consuming. I even reject doing my bills on the internet, I don´t know about here, but in Hungary you keep getting mail from the bank and the electricity company that if you do your bills or if you want to handle your account electronically, you get the bonus and things like that. I reject all of those right away because I do

not want to learn another code and to open up to institutions, organisations, people that I do not know, there is an inborn rejection in me. Moreover, there would be an information overload. For example, I used to know maximum of ten phone numbers, let´s say, forty years ago, you know, the most important phone numbers like my closest family members and some of my girlfriends, but I am not willing to learn all these codes that the new communication technologies require.

F. R.: You mentioned that nowadays students or young people do use some signs which may be identical for all different languages and people and nationalities so how do you, as a linguist who specializes in metaphor and symbols, perceive this new kind of communication via all the emoticons and emojis that is becoming more and more common among young people?

Zoltán Kövecses: To be honest I do not know much about them because the only one that I myself use is the colon parenthesis, which I think is "I am happy" or something like that, but I do not even know whether it is an emoji or an emoticon. Aren´t they the same at all?

F. R.: Even though you do not devote your time to this kind of communication or to studies within this field of communication, I have read about you that you participated in the preparation of Hungarian – English and English – Hungarian dictionaries. Do you think that the way the communication is being affected by the Internet and digital media is anyhow affecting the richness of the language?

Zoltán Kövecses: Again, to be honest, the Internet breakthrough, as we can call it, came after my active participation in dictionary making. I did major Hungarian – English/English – Hungarian dictionary in about the mid-1990s, very shortly after the political changes, and I do not think that Internet language was felt to be as powerful as it is today. So, if you ask me about how politics influenced dictionary making, I will say that it influenced it a lot and that is why they asked me to do the new dictionaries because the Hungarian language had to be re-thought and re-shaped as a result of the changes, like getting rid of Marxist terminology and things like that. However, I am working on some slang projects, I have done some slang dictionaries and in slang the influence of the Internet is much more noticeable and, obviously, I had to pay attention to that and I included that. I also noticed that when I am getting emails or any other piece of communication from people who are younger, twenty-thirty years younger than I am, their style is very different from what I would use. So, it is there, but probably this is common knowledge.

F. R.: And what about the language of those people who are younger than you that you communicate with? What is it like from the stylistic and grammar point of you? I am asking this question because when reading texts produced by students one might observe that many of them do struggle with stylistics, they do struggle with grammar, with using commas and inflections, the things which maybe the generation before them did not struggle so much with. Could this be the result of the fact that communication is becoming more visual and that people, in general, do not read as much as they used to, maybe they do not write as much as they used to and communication is getting more and more brief?

Zoltán Kövecses: It seems to me that this is much more general phenomenon that cannot be specifically limited to the effect or the influence of the Internet. As I say, this is a part of a more general tendency in language use and I can see two more general issues that can also account for what is happening is a result of the Internet influence. I am primarily an English linguist, I mean my specialisation is the English language, and within that I have been working a lot on American English, that was one of my main areas of research. I had books on that and from the perspective of that kind of research and that kind of work, what is going on today is no big surprise. Namely, for example, Shakespeare's English of Elizabethan times and is unbelievably more complex and richer than it was four hundred years later. And then, there was the separation, or the slow development of American English in the course of development of English in general and American English became noticeably simpler in many ways than British English. Now, is this because people did not want to read the British classics? I do not think so. The circumstances of the language changed and so it began to develop in a way which reflected the new worldview of the people. I devoted a complete book to this issue but the bottom line is that American English became simpler. My point is that there is this simplification procedure as a natural tendency in language and it is a response to certain changes

in worldviews and mentality. The real issue, as far as I am concerned, is to be able to put your finger on what those changes are specifically. I try to do that for American English but I did not try to do that for the Internet, that is I did not try to answer the question what makes the Internet so attractive to young people and what is the worldview that underlies the simplified Internet language. I would not be surprised to see that some of the things that account for the simplification of American English are the same that account for the simplification of the Internet language, but that is a large issue in itself. So that is one thing, I can only see this as a more complex issue. Another idea that I think is important is the development of the language sciences. The language sciences became, as so many other things in our world, a lot more liberal than they used to be. What we call prescriptivism in language and in linguistics and in teaching language was replaced by descriptivism. Thus, the point is not to prescribe what to say, how to say, what stylistic properties should be followed and so on. Linguistics became much more liberal as the kind of science in itself, especially in the humanities and in the social sciences. One of the consequences of this was that, as a result, linguists say that we do not have the right and we do not have the competence and we do not have the authority to prescribe how people should speak. Basically, it is the laissez-faire kind of situation, anything goes and anyone can say whatever they want to say and whichever way they want to say it. What was regarded as absolutely ungrammatical in English fifty years ago with the work of certain sociolinguists and linguists in the US and also in Hungary and probably also in Slovakia is now not ungrammatical but it is accepted and they say this is acceptable because, for whatever reason, we are not to judge how people should speak. And I think it is almost implicitly or tacitly encouraging people not to worry about how they speak. We are doing this not only with language but also in the way we dress, in the way behave and now we are constantly told that it doesn´t really matter what kind of tie you wear, it doesn´t really matter what kind of socks you wear and anything goes.

F. R.: Bearing in mind everything you have just said and that you have lectured at many universities in the world, do you think this trend of simplification or this movement from prescriptivism to descriptivism is reflected in the way young people are educated these days?
Zoltán Kövecses: I think yes, because what I noticed was that students in America paid a lot less attention to the way they write English than in other English-speaking countries, let alone non-English speaking countries. But where English is the language of university education, like in Germany, for example, where I have taught in English departments, students were far more precise, far more rule following than the Americans were, because they had learned all the prescriptive rules about the language but Americans did not really care about many of those same things, such as whether you use abbreviations or not.

F. R.: As you are a specialist in metaphors, do you think there are any metaphors that today's media use with higher frequency than other metaphors? And if there are, what message is being communicated via those?
Zoltán Kövecses: Again, this is a question that can only be answered with any precision by doing several years of research. But I can see some outline of this kind of research for the future and, again, I can see two tendencies that are characteristic of media metaphors. One is something that I talked about in today´s lecture. I didn´t go into too many details as I only had about two minutes on them but they are what I call cases of intertextuality when one author borrows a phrase or a sentence or an expression or popular words from another and everybody is using them. Now everyone is talking about the "tsunami" of information instead of many other possibilities that could be used. There is a great deal of following each other. Anything that sounds catchy is taken up in the media world and it is used. Another tendency is that, and I am saying this especially on the basis of Hungarian media language, somehow the language of the media is becoming more and more informal. I remember that there are some cases in my slang dictionaries that I did, let´s say, thirty years ago, that were marked slang and today they are happily using them in the news. At first, I was surprised but now I am getting used to it. There is this overall informalisation of media language that is happening.

Prepared by **František Rigo**