

Unpacking Environmental Metaphors and Ecological Awareness

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Antoinette Camilleri Grima
in dialogue with
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Environmental metaphors are figures of speech that represent our understanding of the environment and our relationship with it. Metaphors used in everyday life belong to a conceptual system of mental networks and associations that help us organise information through a set of correspondences between concrete objects and abstract notions. By unpacking environmental metaphors, we are able to better understand how we relate to nature.

In order to explore some environmental metaphors, I teamed up with a group of six student-teachers in their second year of the Master in Teaching and Learning at the University of Malta. They had participated in the summer school “Eco-Voices: Digital Narratives, Linguistic Diversity and the Environment in a Changing World” at the University of Enna ‘Kore’, 15-19 September 2025, during which the topic of ecological discourse had been treated by several academics and reflected upon in writing by the students.

The following conversation was initiated with the aim of deciphering how the ways in which we talk about the environment portrays ecological agency. It deliberated on whether current idiomatic expressions, songs, literature and drama represent humankind as being the agent acting on the natural environment, or whether nature is the cause of certain experiences harming or benefitting humans. The dialogue developed into a recognition of our interdependence with the ecosystem, and finally to the realisation that our everyday discourse might be hindering us from a fuller appreciation of nature.

Antoinette: At the summer school we conversed a lot about different aspects of the environment and about how lexical choices shape our perception of the world. From Professor Bortoluzzi’s lecture we learnt about how some news items entitled for example ‘Rain causes havoc’ depict nature as agentive, in the sense that it causes mankind to suffer through floods or earthquakes. On the other hand, rhetorical tools are used in environmental activism to evoke emotion, shape attitudes and motivate

urgent action to safeguard nature through slogans like, ‘Mother earth on life support’. Let us think of how we are currently using language. Which metaphors come immediately to mind, and who is depicted as the agent, nature or homo sapiens?

Haley: I have a very topical example. At the moment I am rehearsing for the 2025 Christmas pantomime by ACTion Productions which is about the life of a mermaid in the ocean. The script makes it clear that humankind is the agent of pollution in the oceanic environment. The poor mermaid suffers all sorts of things thrown at her, including plastic bottles, cigarettes, underwear and so on. Each of us might have thrown something into the sea at some point in our life without realising the negative effect of our action. Seeing it from the mermaid’s point of view makes us take pity on her and feel compassion for her suffering, also regretting our mistakes.

Antoinette: The image created by viewing the ocean as someone’s home being continually attacked by things thrown at it has a lot of potential for evoking empathy and promoting engagement in environmental activism, doesn’t it?

Haley: Yes, like contemporary Maltese poetry which is very explicit about human agency in the destruction of the natural environment. Immanuel Mifsud’s poem “Aqta’ fjura u ibni karma” (cut a flower and replace it with a room) is representative of environmental activism. As the poet states in a very ironic way, no one worries any longer about replacing trees with houses and villas.

Cherise: I think that many songs in Maltese consider humankind to be the agents of destruction of the environment, and at the same time they raise awareness urging us to save it, and restore it for our own profit. For example, the Maltese song by Vince Fabri ‘Inħarsu l-ambjent’ (Let’s take care of the environment) speaks clearly about the fact that “everyone needs to be careful” because if the natural environment is destroyed then our life will come to an end. Maltese songwriter Daniel Borg, in his song “Fejn huma?” (Where are they?) laments that his country has changed shape, it has lost its praiseworthy coast and its greenery due to negligence. He blames people for having cut off the air, and their own identity in the process. Similarly, a song produced by a group of secondary school students ‘Tard Wisq?’ (Is it too late?) weep over the uncontrolled construction craze, the resultant lack of fresh air and the fact that people seem too indifferent and unmotivated to redress the harm done before it is too late, “aħna aljenati nibqgħu fis-skiet” (we are alienated and we remain silent).¹

Antoinette: It is interesting how the lyrics refer to “ommna n-natura” (mother nature) and “din l-art hajja, lilkom provdiet” (this land provided you with life) because when the metaphor of nature as a mother and a giver of life is juxtaposed next to words like “qerda” (destruction) and “irmied” (ashes), the contrast becomes particularly powerful. Probably that’s because the conceptual metaphor of motherhood and life is easily available to everyone.

Antonella: It is interesting how Maltese novelist Joe Camilleri questions the assumption that we will continue to be able to know the difference between the natural and the built environment. Camilleri provokes our thought by conjecturing that citizens of the city will never be able to understand the intimate relationship of the farmer with his land. The farmer experiences the rhythm of the seasons, breathes the fresh air of the open countryside and enjoys the fruit of his labour. On the other hand, city life represents closed spaces, stale and polluted air, a stressful routine and no connection with the land and its creations.

¹ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kyWlnCdE9tI&list=RDkyWlnCdE9tI&start_radio=1

Antoinette: This really makes me think that the more land we build, the more people will experience life in the city, and the fewer and fewer experiences of life in the countryside future generations will have. This contrasts sharply with our scientific knowledge about the relevance of the natural environment to our health.

Antonella: In fact, Joe Camilleri emphasises this when he refers to the carob tree, a common endemic species and an icon of nature present in many literary works in Maltese. Camilleri says that the carob tree provides us with shade from the scorching sun and with a green environment all year round, its fruit supplies us with many nutrients including proteins and vitamins. Some medicine is produced from carob seed and carobs are used as animal fodder.²

Antoinette: However, despite the fact that in romantic literature nature was often praised for its many contributions to our life, it was also portrayed in negative ways. Twentieth century poets like Karmenu Vassallo and Ġorġ Pisani sometimes characterise nature as challenging and tormenting us. Vassallo, in his poem “Sajf” (summer), depicts this season in all its bleak detail: scorching heat that leaves us breathless and causes our food to go bad very quickly; it results in drought, perspiration, headaches and swarms of ants and mosquitoes that lead to uncomfortable sleepless nights. Pisani, although in a gentler tone, in his poem “Xwejjah” (Old man) refers to the month of January as being only able to provide cold weather and more drought. Can you think of more examples?

Rachel: I can quote some poems in which agency was attributed to nature, and the poets feared the effects of nature’s actions. In the poem “Żaghżugh ta’ dejjem” (Eternal Youth) by the national poet Dun Karm, the sea is depicted as a cruel force that plays havoc with sea vessels (“taqbad l-iġfien u tilgħab bihom”), and poetess Mary Meilak in her poem ‘Santa Barbara’ prays for protection from lightening that frightens us to death (“ninsabu wisq imwerwra, imbeżza”). Rena Balzan converses with the moon and calls ‘him’ her inspiration, but at the same time informs ‘him’ that she has no more illusions about ‘him’ (“l-ebda illużjoni ma baqaghli dwarek”).

Antoinette: I think that in general we all have a rather ambivalent relationship with the environment. We all want to have a comfortable home where to live, means of transport that get us easily wherever we want to go, and appliances that mitigate the temperature when we are uncomfortable. We rarely stop to think that this lifestyle is damaging our world and its ability to sustain our own life.

Marija: Aren’t we presumptuous in our discourse when, for example, we use idiomatic expressions borrowed from the natural environment? In the three languages I know, Maltese, English and Italian, we use idioms like ‘a fish out of the water’ (Italian: essere un pesce fuor d’acqua; Maltese: bħal ħuta barra mill-ilma) and ‘to put down roots’ (Italian: mettere radici; Maltese: trabbi l-għeruq). But do we, as human beings, really know what it means to be a fish or a plant? We can only imagine, and still we use this imagery borrowed from nature to express human experience.

Caterina: There are other expressions in Maltese borrowed from nature, like ‘as lazy as a dog’ (għażżien daqs kelb), ‘as slim as a herring’ (irqiq daqs aringa) and ‘as hasty as a cat’ (qattusa għaġġelija). Worse still, we call someone ‘as cruel as a dog’ (kemm hu kelb), and ‘as stupid as a donkey’ (kemm hu ħmar). Come to think of it, these are not unprejudiced or fair environmental metaphors, are they?

² <https://kliemustorja.com/2024/10/16/is-sigra-tal-harrub/>

Antoinette: Indeed, yours are significant reflections. We become aware of how we refer to the natural environment when we unpack the metaphors we use. Such an exercise in itself is a pedagogical tool for ecological awareness.

Although the above dialogue referred to only a very small selection of metaphors, it was a useful method to (i) conduct a fruitful follow-up activity to the Eco-Voices summer school; (ii) become ourselves more conscious of some of the ways we use language in relation to the environment; and (iii) sustain the impact of an eco-linguistic approach. These student-teachers and myself enjoyed the exercise, and we will be replicating it in future with other groups. We think that the more unpacking of metaphors we conduct, the more people will become ecologically aware, and this will reinforce everyone's knowledge, attitudes and environment-friendly ideological stance.

Bionotes

Antoinette Camilleri Grima is a Professor of Applied Linguistics at the University of Malta. Following her studies at Master and PhD levels at the University of Edinburgh she worked as a language expert for the Council of Europe, and as a Language Administrator at the Council of Ministers in Brussels. At the University of Malta, she researches and teaches on language education, and she has published many books, chapters and articles in refereed journals. She is an international reviewer for the *Malta Review of Educational Research*, and a co-editor of the *Journal of Multilingual Theories and Practices*.

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