



Language and ecology: A content analysis of ecolinguistics as an emerging research field



Sibo Chen

School of Communication, Simon Fraser University, Canada

HIGHLIGHTS

- This study is the first quantitative meta-analysis of ecolinguistics from the perspective of journal publications.
- A total of 76 journal publications on ecolinguistics between 1991 and 2015 were analyzed.
- The results indicate a promising growth of ecolinguistics as an emerging subfield of language and communication studies.
- The results also suggest current limitations and future research agenda of ecolinguistics.

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 13 October 2015

Received in revised form

24 February 2016

Accepted 9 June 2016

Available online 14 June 2016

1. Introduction

This research note serves as a response to [20] recent call for a coherent definition of “ecolinguistics” and a systemic review of this evolving field. Specifically, the aim of this paper is to offer an up-to-date assessment of the current state of ecolinguistics, synthesize the existing convergences and divergences within the field, and provoke reflections on potential directions of future research under the umbrella concept of “ecolinguistics”. The term “ecolinguistics” and its related concept “language and ecology” first appeared in Ref. [11] work on the interactions between language and its surrounding environment and since then the field has enjoyed a steady development as an emerging interdisciplinary field of linguistics and environmental studies. There have been a series of important developments within ecolinguistics since the 2000s. Studies engaging with the theoretical premises of ecolinguistics have appeared in high impact linguistic journals such as *Critical Discourse Studies*, *Language Sciences*, and *Discourse and Communication*. The establishment of the “language and ecology research forum” (<http://www.ecoling.net/>), which has been recently

renamed “the ecolinguistics association”) has created an online hub for communications and research collaborations among ecolinguistics scholars and practitioners. Textbooks such as [25] and [40] have become available for teaching ecolinguistics at both undergraduate and graduate levels and research programs dedicated to ecolinguistics have become available for prospective graduate students.

Furthermore, the accelerating degradation of our natural environment has made an urgent call for us to rethink the positivist worldview often taken for granted by mainstream linguistic research. As [38] argue, the idea of science as a unidirectional movement toward deeper insights, better methods, and human progress, needs to be put into question and ecolinguistics, with its commitment to ecological and dialectical epistemologies, has significant theoretical and practical implications for human's collective responses to the worsening situation of global ecological crises.

Why is now a good time for a content analysis of ecolinguistics? The answer lies in the diversification of the field and the need for further trans-disciplinary collaborations among environmental research fields. As [20] reports on a recent survey among members of the “language and ecology research forum”, the diversification of ecolinguistics research has generated some disagreements among researchers regarding the definition of the field. While some researchers prefer a unified view on ecolinguistics, referring it as “the study of the interdependence of language and the perception/interpretation of the natural world we live in”, others favor a more topical and surface oriented definition that keeps the field open-ended. Meanwhile, given ecolinguistics' ecological orientation, the field has a great potential for contributing to trans-disciplinary collaborations among environmental research fields such as environmental studies, ecology, and environmental communication. As this article will report later, however, the existing literature of ecolinguistics has demonstrated relatively limited theoretical

E-mail address: siboc@sfu.ca.

impacts over other contingent environmental disciplines, which presents a worthwhile topic for further discussion.

Although a few theoretical syntheses on ecolinguistics and its key theoretical premises already exist e.g. Refs. [5,15,38,39], they have been mainly written from an “insider perspective”, focusing on specific developments of ecolinguistics. To date, very few studies have attempted to offer a systemic review of ecolinguistics’ overall research impact on both linguistics and other contingent ecological disciplines and how the field’s theoretical premises have been adopted by researchers (especially those outside ecolinguistics) in their own studies remains largely unexplored for exceptions, see Refs. [18,19]. As such, I hope that this article will help to provoke further conversations on potential theoretical dialogues between ecolinguistics and other contingent ecological disciplines.

Based on previous studies in relevant fields such as risk communication [9] and media representation of science and climate change [34,35], this article presents a systemic review of ecolinguistics as an emerging research field through a quantitative content analysis of relevant journal publications over the past 25 years (1991–2015). The article examines four basic, yet relevant dimensions of the surveyed journal publications: (1) when the respective studies were published, (2) what and where were these studies’ primary publication venues; (3) what research topics were addressed in these studies; and (4) how these studies proceeded methodologically. In doing so, the paper aims at analyzing to what extent ecolinguistics has grown and diversified over the past 25 years, what kind of “functional differentiations” have been achieved in this field, and what potential issues may need researchers’ attention for the field’s future development. However, before diving into the content analysis’ methodological designs and major findings, it is necessary for us to take a step back and take a brief historical overview of ecolinguistics.

2. Ecolinguistics: a brief overview

Since many scholars have offered cogent and reputable summaries of ecolinguistics’ historical development e.g. Refs. [5,15,18–20], this section will only provide a brief genealogy of the key developmental stages and theoretical insights that outline ecolinguistics’ disciplinary contour. Wilhelm von Humboldt’s (1767–1835) work on comparative linguistics and his view on the interdependency between language and the world has been widely regarded as the predecessor of ecolinguistics, which later on were incorporated into the “linguistic relativity hypothesis” by pioneers of anthropological linguistics in North America, such as Franz Boas (1858–1942), Edward Sapir (1884–1939) and Benjamin Whorf (1897–1941). To some extent, the famous yet controversial “Sapir-Whorf hypothesis”, the idea that a speaker’s perception of the world such as worldviews and cognitive processes is conditioned by his/her linguistic system, can be seen as the first explicit attempt to theorize the complex relations between languages and their surrounding contexts. As time went on, contestations over the validity of “Sapir-Whorf hypothesis” in North America influenced the establishment of cognitive linguistics whereas in Europe some scholars began to explore language-context interactions through ecological concepts.¹ As several leading practitioners of ecolinguistics e.g. Refs. [5,38] point out, the speech titled “the ecology of language” given by Ref. [11] at Center for Applied Linguistics in

Washington D.C. marked the “proper beginning” of ecolinguistics. Within this important speech [11], argued that language is part of a larger environment that is physical (a language’s users only exist in physical environment), psychological (a language interacts with other languages in the minds of bilingual and multilingual speakers), and sociological (a language interacts with the society in which it functions as a communication medium). Although many aspects of [11] argument are reflected in miscellaneous linguistic sub-fields such as anthropological linguistics, psycholinguistics, and sociolinguistics, it is his proposal of future research on language ecology, that is, “the study of interactions between any given language and its environment” (p. 325), that leads to later developments in ecolinguistics [8]. From this time onwards, references to the subject of language and environment or language and ecology occasionally popped up in linguistics publications.

Yet, it was until the 1990s the field of ecolinguistics really began to take off and consolidate as an emerging discipline distinctive from sociolinguistics [5]. This decade started with [10] keynote speech “new ways of meaning” at the 1990 World Conference of Applied Linguistics, in which he made connections between language and environmental issues, and to a less extent, between language and politics. Central to Halliday’s argument is his critique of “linguistic anthropocentrism”, which can be understood in two senses: on the one hand, in everyday communications nature and non-human creatures are often addressed in mere categories of usefulness, which demonstrates the sense of utilitarian anthropocentrism embedded in daily language usage; on the other hand, ecological issues are often escalated by discourses promoting non-sustainable actions. Halliday’s remark on the interplays between language and ecological issue broadened Haugen’s original elaboration of “language ecology”. The central role held by Halliday in the functional approach to language research also helped to promote the recognition of ecolinguistics among the entire linguistic community. Meanwhile, at the same conference the term “ecolinguistics” was formally introduced into the debate on language and ecology, which further enhanced the field’s visibility. The 1990s also witnessed the publications of [14] and [23]; two seminal books summarizing the achievements of ecolinguistics in its consolidating stage.

As we stepped into the new millennium, the field of ecolinguistics also moved into a new developmental stage, as suggested by a series of academic events dedicated to ecolinguistics (e.g. “30 Years of Language and Ecology” at University of Graz, 2000), the notable increase of book-length publications on this field especially [6,15,25], and the establishment of the “language and ecology research forum” in 2004. Most recently, a special issue on ecolinguistics was published in *Language Sciences* (2014/Jan), which offered an up-to-date evaluation of ecolinguistics’ past, present, and future. As [5] comments in his contribution to this special issue, “nowadays we can safely say that ecolinguistics is a well-established discipline” (p. 125).

In short, what is ecolinguistics? According to [40]; “ecolinguistics analyses language to reveal the stories we live by, judges those stories according to an ecosophy, resists stories which oppose the ecosophy, and contributes to the search for new stories to live by” (p.183). In other words, ecolinguistics seeks to explore linguistic phenomena found in inter-language, inter-human, and human-nature relationships from the perspective of ecological philosophy. In contrast to other subfields of linguistics, ecolinguistics adopts “ecosophy” as its principle normative framework. Central to ecosophy is the commitment to ecological equilibrium, which, unlike positivist worldviews, rejects the separation between human beings and nature under Cartesian dualism and proposes that ecological crises require not only scientific solutions but also moral introspections of anthropocentric activities [27].

¹ The distinction between North America and Europe here is not definitive since we can find ecolinguists (e.g. Einar Haugen and Adam Makkai) working in the U.S. and vice versa. Yet, current research practices within ecolinguistics indeed suggest that the “ecology of language” pioneered by Einar Haugen has been better received in Europe.

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/1100463>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/1100463>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)