



From the analysis of ecological discourse to the ecological analysis of discourse



Richard Alexander^{a,*}, Arran Stibbe^b

^aVienna University of Economics and Business, Vienna, Austria

^bUniversity of Gloucester, Cheltenham, UK

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ABSTRACT

This article consists of a theoretical consideration of ecolinguistics, starting off with a working definition and then using this to look at two principal trends within the emerging discipline. The two trends considered are 'the analysis of ecological discourse' and the metaphorical 'language ecology'. The conclusion is that ecolinguistics is more than just the analysis of texts which happen to be explicitly about the environment, and is more than just a metaphorical way of thinking about language contact. Instead, ecolinguistics is, primarily, the 'ecological analysis of discourse'.

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1. Introduction

This article describes and explores Ecological Discourse Analysis as a central approach in the discipline of ecolinguistics, and contrasts it with 'the analysis of ecological discourse' and 'language ecology'. The starting point is a definition of ecolinguistics, something which is not without its difficulties since there is no generally accepted definition and any definition is bound to either be so vague that it is meaningless (e.g., the study of language in an ecological context) or to exclude approaches which someone, somewhere considers to be ecolinguistics. Still, a definition is necessary even just for the span of this article, in order to put a case forward for the central importance of Ecological Discourse Analysis.

Clearly ecolinguistics combines ecology and linguistics, two disciplines which at first appear to be unconnected. The disconnection occurs only if ecology, which is the study of the relationship of organisms with each other and the physical environment, fails to consider human beings as organisms. An inclusive view would be that ecology consists of the relationships of humans with other humans, other organisms, and the physical environment. Language, then, is relevant to the extent that it plays a role in how humans relate to each other, to other organisms and to the environment. That does not mean that any study of the role of language in setting up relationships is ecolinguistics – there is another crucial aspect of ecology that needs to be present. The relationships that ecologists study are not just inconsequential ways that organisms interact with each other and their environment, but specifically those that sustain life. In the same way that medical science is normatively orientated towards the prevention of disease and sustaining the life of individual people, the discipline of ecology is normatively orientated towards not just studying but also preserving the ecosystems that life depends on. This is very much the spirit in which much ecolinguistics is carried out, and there is no reason why a normative orientation towards protecting, preserving and enhancing the systems that support life should make it any less scientific or evidence based than medical science.

If we take the definition of linguistics as simply 'the study of language' for now, we end up with the following definition for ecolinguistics:

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: richard.alexander@wu.ac.at (R. Alexander).

Ecolinguistics is the study of the impact of language on the life-sustaining relationships among humans, other organisms and the physical environment. It is normatively orientated towards preserving relationships which sustain life.

In other words, ecolinguistics is concerned with how language is involved in forming, maintaining, influencing or destroying relationships between humans, other life forms and the environment. The idea of 'humans' is rather vague – what is meant is certainly not humans *en masse*, since it would be impossible to generalise. It is not specific individuals, since on their own few people have a heavy influence on general human behaviour. Instead, the most appropriate level appears to be groups of humans as they are organised into cultures, societies, professions, industries and institutions. Groups of humans coordinate their practices and world-views using discourses – particular ways of talking about, writing about, representing, and, ultimately, constructing reality. Discourses consist of clusters of linguistic (and other semiotic) features used by groups in speaking about the world, which come together to produce specific models of reality. These models or shaping devices enable humans to construct relationships with the real world and so it is these models, and the cluster of linguistic features which make them, that are a primary concern of ecolinguistics.

The article does not aim to give a comprehensive description of the 'ecological analysis of discourse', but rather to explain what it consists of through contrasting it with two different approaches: 'the analysis of ecological discourse' and 'language ecology'.

2. Some preliminary remarks on language and the world

We begin with some general observations. Are our perceptions influenced by language? It is practically a truism that they both are and are not. J.R. Firth's (1957: 24) position can help us:

Using language is one of the forms of human life, and speech is immersed in the immediacy of social intercourse. The human body is that region of the world which is the primary field of human experience but it is continuous with the rest of the world. We are in the world and the world is in us. Voiceproduced sound has its origins in the deep experience of organic existence. In terms of living, language activity is meaningful.

Notice how Firth focuses on human oneness with the world – an anthropologically monist perspective which is hence profoundly ecological. The 'deep experience of organic existence' has given rise to human language and hence the key phrase '[i]n terms of living, language activity is meaningful' has clear material and social roots. Firth's pupil, Halliday, has focused holistically on the 'meaningfulness' of the material and social system that is language. He notes that semantic systems (1978: 198) 'are significant for the ways their speakers interact with one another'. Yet they do not 'determine the ways in which the members of the community *perceive* the world around them'. Halliday pinpoints how they 'determine what the members of the community *attend to*' (1978: 198) (Halliday's emphasis).

So it is the case that what people around us 'attend to' is linguistically shaped. Recurrent wordings or expressions have a habitualizing effect on society, as too do particular discourse patterns. These serve to mould and anchor the everyday culture of the speech community which uses them. But such is human history that people can of course think outside the box, as Halliday notes:

We are not the prisoners of cultural semiotic; we can all learn to move outside it. But this requires a positive act of semiotic reconstruction. We are socialised within it, and our meaning potential is derived from it (1978: 140).

In his later work (2007: 13) Halliday refers to 'semiodiversity' or diversity of meanings, raising the complex issue of how the human race as a whole actually benefits from such diversity. Against this background we now address the issue of how language influences humans' attention with regard to ecological issues.

We will be aiming to demonstrate that the discourse employed in specific contexts and situations which deal with ecological issues constructs either explicitly, or more likely implicitly, standpoints on a problem. What is deeply embedded in or even hidden by certain linguistic choices is what a critical analysis of ecological texts sets out to unearth.

3. Analysis of ecological discourse

We turn now to what we can call the analysis of ecological discourse or the ways humans use language to talk about ecology. We consider what has been achieved in research and practical and impact terms.

Over the past three decades a considerable body of both academic research work and activist, political and journalistic literature has accumulated. Copious research findings analyzing the discourse surrounding a wide range of ecological issues and activities have been accumulated. Numerous methods have been applied to show how aspects of the ecology and environment have been articulated and construed in the media and advertizing fields. We will make no attempt to survey this vast field. Instead we briefly pick out some representative findings to illustrate some of the main themes and approaches involved.

We can start off with Fill and Mühlhäusler (2001). This is collection of significant contributions to the now established field of ecolinguistics. There is a section with many articles explicitly analyzing ecological discourse. Such research brings out the involvement of the language system in constructing or, at the least, shaping a viewpoint on, ecological issues. Following Gerbig (1993) and Schleppegrell (1996) one can look at features rendering abstraction and agency or lack of it.

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