Eco-Linguistics, Language and Linguistics

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Abstract

Ecolinguistics is a new interdisciplinary field that studies the relationship between language and environment. The link between language and environment is based on how human beings behave the natural world under the influence of thoughts, concepts, ideologies and worldviews, all of which are formed by language. It is through the language that consumer-branded identities are built up and life is set to accumulate, and it is through a language that people resist consumerism, and people are encouraged to be "more, not to have more." Through language, mentally, the world of nature is reduced to objects or resources that are used exclusively to capture humans, and through language, individuals are encouraged to respect and protect life-supporting systems. So, in simple terms, ecolinguistics is a critique of forms of language that promote environmental degradation, and help find new forms of language that persuade people to protect the world of nature. In this article, Ecolinguistics and its role as a mediator between language and environment is discussed. At the end, it is concluded that by virtue of Semiotics, the link between language and environment gets more prominent and ecolinguistic studies arise.

Keywords: Ecolinguistics, Environment, Language, Semiotics

Introduction

Ecolinguistics, or ecological linguistics, emerged in the 1990s as a new frame of study of linguistic research, widening sociolinguistics to take into account not only the social context in which language is embedded, but also the ecological context.

Ecolinguistics is a new branch of linguistics which investigates the role of language in the development and possible solution of ecological and environmental problems. For this, some ecolinguists use the concept of the eco-system metaphorically for language world systems which they analyse with the help of concepts transferred from biological ecology.

Ecolinguists criticize language on the levels of langue and parole and point out uneccological language uses and "anthropocentrism"s which represent nature from the point of view of its usefulness for humans. In a wider understanding, the "growthism", "sexism", "classism" and "anthropocentrism" inherent in many languages and language uses are criticized.

Another important field of ecolinguistics is the research area of the relation between linguistic and biological diversity (two phenomena ecolinguists aim to preserve).
Michael Halliday's 1990 paper *New ways of Meaning: the challenge to applied linguistics* is often credited as a seminal work which provided the stimulus for linguists to consider the ecological context and consequences of language. Among other things, the challenge that Halliday put forward was to make linguistics relevant to overarching contemporary issues, particularly the widespread destruction of the ecosystems that life depends on. The main example Halliday gave was that of 'economic growth', describing how 'countless texts repeated daily all around the world contain a simple message: growth is good. Many is better than few, more is better than less, big is better than small, grow is better than shrink', which leads to ecologically destructive consequences.

**Theoretical Framework**

Since Halliday's initial comments, the field of ecolinguistics has developed in several directions, employing a wide range of linguistic frameworks and tools to investigate language in an ecological context. The International Ecolinguistics Association, characterizes ecolinguistics in these terms:

"Ecolinguistics explores the role of language in the life-sustaining interactions of humans, other species and the physical environment. The first aim is to develop linguistic theories which see humans not only as part of society, but also as part of the larger ecosystems that life depends on. The second aim is to show how linguistics can be used to address key ecological issues, from climate change and biodiversity loss to environmental justice."[2]

In this way, the 'eco' of ecolinguistics corresponds to ecology in its literal sense of the relationship of organisms (including humans) with other organisms and the physical environment. This is a sense shared with other ecological humanities disciplines such as ecocriticism and ecopsychology.

The term 'ecolinguistics' has also been used with a metaphorical sense of 'ecology', for example in 'Linguistic ecology', 'communication ecology' and 'learning ecology' in ways which do not include consideration of other species or the physical environment. This is becoming less prevalent now as ecolinguistics becomes increasingly understood as a form of ecological humanities/social science.

Another aspect of ecolinguistics is the influence of the natural world on language. In 1996, David Abram's book, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-than-Human World*, described how the wider ecology (or 'the more than human world') shapes language in oral cultures (Abram, 1996), helping people attune to their environment. On the other hand, writing has gradually alienated people in literate cultures from the natural world, to the extent that 'our organic atonement to the local earth is thwarted by our ever-increasing intercourse with our own signs' (1996:267).
Overall there are three main areas of interest for ecolinguistics. The first can be described as 'The Ecological Analysis of Language', the second 'Language Diversity', and the third 'The Influence of Ecology on Language'.

Ecological analysis of language

The ecological analysis of language draws on a wide range of linguistic tools including critical discourse analysis, framing theory, cognitive linguistics, identity theory, rhetoric and systemic functional grammar to reveal underlying worldviews or the 'stories we live by'. The stories we live by are cognitive structures in the minds of individuals or across a society (social cognition) which influence how people treat each other, other animals, plants, forests, rivers and the physical environment. The stories are questioned from an ecological perspective with reference to an ecological framework (or ecosophy), and judged to be beneficial in encouraging people to protect the ecosystems that life depends on, or destructive in encouraging behavior which damages those ecosystems. Ecolinguistics attempts to make a practical difference in the world through resisting destructive stories and contributing to the search for new stories to live by (Stibbe 2015). Stories which have been exposed and resisted by ecolinguistics include consumerist stories, stories of unlimited economic growth, advertising stories, stories of intensive farming, and stories which represent nature as a machine or a resource. Using Positive Discourse Analysis, ecolinguistics has also searched for new stories to live by through exploring nature writing, poetry, environmental writing and traditional and indigenous forms of language around the world.

This form of analysis started with the application of critical discourse analysis to texts about the environment and environmentalism, in order to reveal hidden assumptions and messages and comment on the effectiveness of these in achieving environmental aims (e.g. Harré et al. 1999). It then developed to include analysis of any discourse which has potential consequences for the future of ecosystems, such as neoliberal economic discourse or discursive constructions of consumerism, gender, politics, agriculture and nature (e.g. Goatly 2000). The cognitive approach and the term 'stories we live by' was introduced in Stibbe (2015), which describes eight kinds of story: ideology, framing, metaphor, evaluation, identity, conviction, salience and erasure. Approaches such as environmental communication and ecocriticism have broadly similar aims and techniques to this form of ecolinguistics.

Language diversity

Language diversity is part of ecolinguistics because of the relationship between diversity of local languages and biodiversity. This relationship arises because of the ecological wisdom (or cultural adaptation to the environment) that is encoded in local languages. The forces of globalisation and linguistic imperialism are allowing dominant language to spread, and replace these local languages (Nettle and Romaine 2000). This leads to a loss of both sustainable local cultures and
the important ecological knowledge contained within their languages. One of the goals of ecolinguistic research is to protect both cultural diversity and the linguistic diversity that supports it (Terralingua 2016, Nettle and Romaine 2000, Harmond 1996, Mühlhäusler 1995). This research is in line with the United Nations Environment Program's position that:

"Biodiversity also incorporates human cultural diversity, which can be affected by the same drivers as biodiversity, and which has impacts on the diversity of genes, other species, and ecosystems. (UNEP 2007)"

Nettle and Romaine (2000:166) write that 'Delicate tropical environments in particular must be managed with care and skill. It is indigenous peoples who have the relevant practical knowledge, since they have been successfully making a living in them for hundreds of generations. Much of this detailed knowledge about local ecosystems is encoded in indigenous language and rapidly being lost'. Mühlhäusler (2003:60) describes how 'The rapid decline in the world's linguistic diversity thus must be regarded with apprehension by those who perceive the interconnection between linguistic and biological diversity'.

Overall, language diversity is part of ecolinguistics because of the correlation between the diversity of language and biological diversity, with the ecological wisdom embedded in local cultures being the link between the two.

**Influence of ecology on language**

Abram's early chapter on "The Flesh of Language" examined the contribution of the sensate body—and of the body's ongoing interaction with the earthly terrain—in the emergence of meaningful speech. A longer chapter on "Animism and the Alphabet" contrasted the discourse of indigenous, oral cultures with the discourse of literate cultures. For oral cultures, the coherence of spoken language is inseparable from the coherence of the surrounding ecology, from the expressive vitality of the more-than-human terrain. For these peoples "it is the animate earth that speaks; human speech is but a part of that vaster discourse." (p. 179) A subsequent chapter, entitled "In the Landscape of Language," drew examples from a range of divergent oral cultures to show some of the diverse ways that the local, more-than-human terrain informs and influences the discursive speech of oral cultures. Overall, Abram argues that ecology plays a key role in shaping human language in oral cultures, but with writing this role becomes less and less significant. This results in a situation where ‘our organic atonement to the local earth is thwarted by our ever-increasing intercourse with our own signs’ (1996:267). He therefore argues for using language in ways which bring ecology (or the 'more-than-human-world') back into language:

"there can be no question of simply abandoning literacy, of turning away from all writing. Our task, rather, is that of taking up the written word, with all of its potency, and patiently, carefully, writing language back into the land. Our craft is that of releasing the budded, earthy intelligence
of our words, freeing them to respond to the speech of the things themselves - to the green uttering-forth of leaves from the spring branches.” (Abram 1996:273)

Linguistic Ecology

The term 'linguistic ecology' was first used in an article on the "language situation" in Arizona (Voegelin, Voegelin and Schutz, 1967). It was taken up by Einar Haugen, who pioneered a form of linguistics which used the metaphor of an ecosystem to describe the relationships among the diverse forms of language found in the world, and the groups of people who speak them. Linguistic Ecology looks at how languages interact with each other and the places they are spoken in, and frequently argues for the preservation of endangered languages as an analogy of the preservation of biological species. Some claim that this is more properly considered a form of sociolinguistics rather than ecolinguistics since the focus is on humans and language rather than the impact of language on actual biological/physical ecosystems. However, others have argued that separation of the metaphorical 'linguistic ecology' from ecolinguistics would be reductionist (Steffensen 2007), because high linguistic diversity is associated with high biological diversity (see Bastardas-Boada 2002). The relationship between linguistic diversity and biodiversity is claimed to arise since local ecological knowledge is built into local language varieties and threatened if the local language is threatened by a more dominant language (see Mühlhäusler 1995).

Eco-linguistics in Iran

Most academic attempts during the last two decades have primarily focused on describing the influence of nature on language through studying morphological characteristics of names local people in different regions in Iran select for their agricultural tools, products, foods, animals, and so on. We classify this type of research as “Morphological Studies”. A very few studies have tried to focus on discourse analysis of language-environment interaction. This category, “Discourse Studies” as we name it, will follow the morphological studies section(Talebi Dastenae and Poshtvan, 2018). There is a third line of research – toponyms – that is yet to emerge but has great potential to become a hot topic at least in Iran. The only research that addressed toponyms from an ecolinguistic perspective in Iran was conducted by Albuquerque et al. (2018), in which the researchers compared the mechanisms of place naming in two different regions; Sergipe a Northeastern Brazilian region and Gilan the Northern Iranian province. They concluded that the mechanisms in both locations under study are in close connection with their natural environment and that both languages fall within Nash’s (2015) category of “ecologically embedded languages”. We did not consider a separate category for this type of studies, since no academic papers of this type were identified in the Iranian ecolinguistic research studies.

It is only twenty years that some scholars have tried to research ecolinguistics, although there is great potential in Iran, considering the current challenges the whole country is facing with regard
to environmental issues as well as depleting resources. Iranian ecolinguistic studies are far too distant from similar international efforts, but can generally be divided into two categories of morphological and discourse studies (Talebi Dastenaee and Poshtvan, 2018).

It is roughly 20 years that Iranian linguists have shown interest in ecology-related linguistic topics, however not necessarily within the globally known substrate of ecolinguistics. Other than the few studies mentioned here, nothing much has been done within the area of ecolinguistics and those few works presented here, unfortunately, do not pursue a clear line of research. Rather, they are all some scattered, individual, small-scale, and brief studies that do not touch the depth of the concept. It seems that ecolinguistics in Iran tends to pursue the trend in which the direct interaction of language-society-environment is sought. Nevertheless, toponymy has a huge potential for ecolinguistic studies, as Iran is a diverse country in terms of geography, culture, and language. This realm is open to researchers to produce seminal academic research in order to document and preserve place names, which are the country’s national heritage. Besides, a proper ecolinguistic investigation of the interactions between the cognitive structures shared by communities, the stories we live by, and the linguistic representation of those stories (Stibbe, 2015) requires the contributions from toponymy studies (Ibid).

**Conclusion**

Ecolinguistics is a new branch of linguistics that studies the role of language in creating environmental problems, and provides possible solutions to these problems.

Ecolinguistics reveals destructive environmental and linguistic uses of the word, and the "human-like" view of the environment that portrays the world of nature from the point of view of its usefulness to humans and critically analyzes them. In a wider sense, in this approach, the "developmental", "gender-based discrimination", "speciesism" and "human-mindedness" are challenged and criticized in the face of many linguistic discourses and applications from semiotics.

Some topics of interest in environmental linguistics studies are:

- Linguistics and biodiversity
- Language and environmental problems
- How to represent environmental issues and issues in language texts
- How to transfer environmental concepts in the language system
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**References**


