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## Eco-Linguistics in English: Reviewing the role of language in environmental discourse

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### Abstract

Eco-linguistics has been developed as an interdisciplinary subject, which analyses dynamic interaction of language, ecology, and environmental sustainability. The paper under review examines the influence of the English language in creating, propagating and challenging the environmental discourse within the social, educational, political, and media practices. Based on some of the essential theoretical frameworks including ecological discourse analysis, critical discourse studies, and linguistic ecology, the paper brings to our attention the manner in which linguistic decisions made in English affect environmental awareness, values, and behaviors. The review shows that English as a global lingua franca is at the core of framing environmental issues, creating discourses of climate change, destruction of biodiversity, and sustainability, as well as justifying certain ideologies and power relations. Special care is taken in relation to metaphors, evaluative speech, framing approaches, and story lines that either facilitate ecological accountability or support anthropocentric and exploitative perceptions of the world. Moreover, the review also mentions increased usage of eco-linguistics in the English language education, where the environmentally-oriented material is employed to improve the linguistic and ecological literacy. Empirical research findings in recent past show that incorporation of eco-linguistic principles in learning English can help learners develop critical thinking and pro environmental attitudes. Although it is becoming more relevant, the discipline encounters issues to do with methodological diversity, less cross-cultural attitudes, and the prevalence of Global North discourses. The verdict of this review is that eco-linguistics within English offers an effective approach to the analytical and pedagogical approach to studying and re-structuring environmental discourse, and that more context-provocative, multilingual and action-based research is needed to aid the cause of global sustainable actions.

**Keywords:** Eco-linguistics, Environmental discourse, English language, Ecological discourse analysis, Sustainability

### 1. Introduction

Ecolinguistics studies the interplay between language and the environment in various speech communities around the world. <sup>[1]</sup> defines it as “a global perspective on the relationship between language and the environment” found in communities of English and in the spatialized modeling of language and the study of discourse, ideology, framing, meaning especially metaphor or semantic prosody and the environment. A wide range of English varieties, ranging from indigenous Englishes through varieties centered on pursuit of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to those written by non-native speakers in Englishes Other Than English (EOTEs), can also be studied <sup>[2]</sup>.

Ecolinguistics has theoretical and practical aims. Theoretical objectives include expanding definitions of rhetoric to account for tension and countervailing forces beyond those typically associated with persuasive communication. Environmental communication theory and methodology presently conform to commonsense views that model environmental problems and communications exclusively. The research is grounded in the assumption that ways of speaking about the environment impact relationships with it, and explore how the English language in various forms and communities impacts understandings of the non-human world and approaches to addressing challenges like climate change <sup>[3, 4]</sup>.

### 2. Conceptual Foundations of Eco-Linguistics

Language is integral to thought and action and ultimately to the future of all living things. Humans are now creating a pro-environmental discourse incompatible with longstanding

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anti-environmental worldviews. The challenge is to unpick, one by one, the structures and features of English that reflect and perpetuate an often-unarticulated stance of anthropocentrism, extractivism and an ideological discourse that is overtly pro-consumption<sup>[5, 6]</sup>.

Over the past thirty years, the study of the relationship of language to the environment - now called eco-linguistics - has become a distinct strand of discourse analysis, one with a critically orientated agenda that analyses how language constrains thought and guides behaviour as human society heads towards existential crises of climate change and biodiversity loss. The principal focus has been on eco-critical studies of the lexicon, metaphor and framing. Much early work was concentrated on English, and the proto-models of the field emerged from environmental ecological theory or cognitive linguistics alongside discourse analysis and critical discourse analysis<sup>[7]</sup>.

### 3. Language and Environmental Perception in English

Although “the environment” is a general expression, if it concerns a field of study, it is commonly used in an English-speaking context with a strong emphasis on a particular topic, lexicon, and modes of discourse.

Scholars share the belief that a strong understanding of the lexicon and discourse of the environment may help in imposing the urgency of the environmental situation on people and potentially lead to more vigorous actions by individuals. This research may contribute towards that goal. To be specific, careful examination of the influence of the English language on the perceptions of the environment among English-speaking individuals, through the analysis of a range of lexis and discursive practices in various genres of English on the environment, may yield further insight into how the language of the environment is articulated, established, and transformed through time, as well as the state of the environmental situation in the English-speaking world at both the global and local levels<sup>[8, 9]</sup>.

As a starting point, it may be valuable to clarify the English-language treatise on the environment by studying initial conceptual lexis associated with the topic. Within the domain of conceptual lexis, human-oriented benefits, such as health maintenance and economic development, can be addressed further, since these are often regarded as crucial to executing collaborative efforts in the topic at stake. Attention could next turn to discourse analysis. In developing environmental communication, policy-making, and regulatory frameworks, the domain of highly influential institutions may be examined. This inquiry might uncover the principal institutions articulating the topic by means of the English language<sup>[10]</sup>. There is also great interest in identifying the most commonly recurring terms associated with the conceptual domain, which consequently guides further discourse analysis. By targeting these frequently recurring institutions and environmental references articulated within their texts in an examination of the relevant discourse, the progression of environmental perception may be delineated<sup>[11, 12]</sup>.

### 4. Discourse Analysis in Environmental Communication

Language shapes how society (de)values nature. English frames messages on the environment; frames orients nationwide communication inside the Commonwealth. A discourse-analytic approach frames forms, contexts, and institutional characteristic of communication<sup>[13]</sup>. The

public-consumer communication addresses the declaration of sustainability or eco-labels. The closed-door-style genre creates ambiguity of content, institution, process. The broad framework, marginalised voice beside white elite, yet consideration of agency stresses heteroglossic voices antecedent conflict<sup>[14]</sup>.

Lexis encodes broader frames and determines sentiment toward nature. Shares key terms (e.g. environment, climate, ecosystem, pollution; green, sustainability) establishes common abstract domain. Hedges mark fulfilment of framework, while reinforcing certain notion, thus fashioning reader's attitude<sup>[15, 16]</sup>.

### 5. Lexical Choices and Environmental Valence in English

Environmental discourse involves lexical choices that frame natural elements and build pro-environmental valence. A preliminary inventory catalogues terms, collocations, and paradigmatic networks used to describe the environment; dominant collocates indicating agency, control, and objectification suggest the conceptualisation of the environment as a tool for human resource exploitation, with correspondence between valence and broad sustainability<sup>[17, 18]</sup>. The fraction of evaluative language modulated by hedge devices varies considerably across English-language news media. The presence or absence of hedges regulating assessment of the environment closely aligns with perceived urgency and sense of individual responsibility in the take-up of environmental issues among disciplines in the public sphere. Whereas a call to action model emerges within a loosely defined activist frame in the policy arena, academic and corporate channels assume a ‘wait-and-see’ stance with longer-term commitment necessary for meaningful change<sup>[19, 20]</sup>.

### 6. Policy-Making, Media, and Public Engagement

Language plays a central role in developing and communicating environmental and climate change policies. Such policies seek to mobilize political action (interest and participation) and are created by policies at multiple levels (e.g., global, national, regional, local) and on various topics (e.g., disaster management, food security, water conservation). They form discourse chains that link the policies of various stakeholders and their own specific framing of the issues involved. English-language governance documents at the national level (Green Paper, State of the Environment Report, Iceland) reveal that the discursive framing surrounding climate change covers many dimensions (global warming, water resources, biodiversity, etc.), reflecting the policy concerns of multiple authoritative groups (the Economy, the Planning Agency, the Finance Ministry, etc.)<sup>[21, 22]</sup>. The framing is further shaped by organizations (OECD, UNDP, etc.) that participate in the political agenda at the national level through their international superseding role; the chosen dimension often aligns with the framing favored by these organizations. Within a single policy sector, the framing of a topical issue is similarly influenced by the pre-existing agenda established by other politicians. Text construction coheres with the existence of an agenda (relevance to the policy) and is governed by complex rhetorical patterns in which the impact of specific actors' credentials or the degree of urgency in addressing a critical issue varies<sup>[23, 24]</sup>.

The main element of the chain of discourse of the national

climate is information that is introduced and packaged as per the institutional stakeholders. Themes and issues, particularly those with risk dimension are used in media ecosystem to influence the choice of news to be covered and influence the way information is presented and the tone in which the coverage is carried out and to define the degree of trustworthiness the audience will place on the coverage. Media coverage often comes in line with the administrative agenda, therefore, having visible influence at the stage of public-policy. Instead, the public is an agent of interaction between citizens and the authorities in the formation of attitudes towards climate change; it is one of the issues that should be discussed explicitly and communicatively. Language tricks are also used in order to provoke action more than recognition [25, 26].

## 7. Education, Pedagogy, and Scholarly Collaboration

Environmental issues are ubiquitous and complex. Attempting to clarify them through research and education poses a considerable challenge for both scholars and teachers. Eco-linguistics is one of the frameworks that can aid in meeting that challenge because it highlights connections among language, ecology and environment and has a good deal of analytical confidence built up by the work of Peters, Stibbe and many others [27, 28]. Proposing classroom genres, digital literacy practices and collaborative formats for eco-linguistics could therefore facilitate sharing knowledge, writing collaboratively and enabling interdisciplinary discussions that involve, for example, scholars and graduate students in linguistics, environmental studies and communication studies. Attention to eco-linguistics could promote research addressing matters that occupy significant time in English-language policy-making such as climate change and biodiversity [29]. Accompanying training in frameworks outside the established linguistic canon might further enhance eco-linguistics through wider account of diverse ecolinguistic frameworks [30].

## 8. Methodological Approaches in Eco-Linguistic Research

Research on the role of language in environmental discourse has adopted various approaches, drawing on diverse sources of data and analytical techniques to illuminate the ways in which language shapes relationships with the world. This section reviews some of the predominant methodological frameworks that inform studies of the relationship between language and the environment, together with the ethical considerations they entail. Four main strategies can be identified in the literature: corpus-based, qualitative, mixed-method, and publicly engaged research [31, 32].

Corpus-based method is most appropriate in the discovery of language patterns on a greater text and time scale. Corpus analysis helps the researcher to evaluate the prominence of environmental concerns in entire texts, genres or types of discourse and to engage in comprehensive comparisons of varieties of English and other non-English language [33]. The methodology is based on the automated processing, pattern extraction and interpretation of evaluative or attitudinal meaning to the environment [34]. Although the analysis of the digital text corpora may be implemented as a supplementing methodology, individual studies of the corpus demand a high level of data selection, including representativeness, domain specificity, and practical feasibility and assuring the coherence of the texts used in

the corpus. Transnational methods usually require extra criteria to select against biased generalization of results of small sample of commonwealth varieties of English [35]. The dynamics of text and discourse are more of qualitative approaches rather than systematic material patterns. They include multidimensional biographic descriptions of the use of language, which concern speaker intention [36]. These methods tend to produce copious accounts of the role of English in the formation of social practices but rarely produce findings of general interest. There have been growing interests in qualitative research which is neither too deeply nor too broad in its focus, but is focused on discursive themes or strategies that recur across enclosed textual settings including policy papers and media reports. Also inside the network of such stratified scopes the qualitative studies possess their own methodological complexities, especially when they entail the conversion of material into coddable dimensions or when the large volumes of text make the recording of individual research judgments complicated [37, 38].

## 9. Critical Perspectives and Limitations

The fact that the complete overview of the influence of human languages on the way we perceive the natural world, and English in particular, on the current environmental crisis is something that can lead to a decent share of pitfalls is a fact [39]. First of all, a strong case could certainly be made for the contention that the scope of the enterprise is far too ambitious, given the sheer diversity of ecological issues and the great variety of societal responses organized through the medium of language. One of the most blatant limitations is the way English is seen as a universal language. This attitude is not necessarily intended to be prescriptive or presuppose a hierarchical ordering of English varieties; nonetheless, it may well convey the message of a far greater corresponding authority of predominantly Western Anglophone ecological thought, whether or not this is directly intended [40, 41].

Attention to these issues automatically suggests a second avenue of critique. The framing of many of the recommended actions and outreach messages has frequently been shaped by perceptions current in other regions of the world, often articulated by other varieties of English, in which the range of focus is distinctly different [42]. These settings, too, frequently involve analyses undertaken in the context of the wider ecocide framework, although the dimensions of the threat tend to differ from those that have persisted within the broader Western tradition. Consequently, any encounter with corresponding English-discourse material would be likely to engage with under-explored and comparatively non-canonical settings in those regions of the world where eco-linguistic analysis has been received and engaged with rather differently [43].

## 10. Implications for Theory and Practice

Ecolinguistic analysis of environmental discourse has contributed greatly to theory and practice in terms of the involvement of language in bridging the relationship between society and the environment. The relevance and applicability of English has generally not been much recognized in a similar manner. This paper attempts to fill that void by answering the following questions- What is the role of the English language in developing environmental discourse? What is the relationship of that role to

languageenvironment relationships? What is the theoretical and practical implication?- bringing together things that would have otherwise not been related<sup>[44]</sup>.

English language is very important in the way individuals think with regard to the environment. Conceptual framing is one means that semiotic systems create and spread ideas in society. The lexicalization of English frames in the case of environmental issues has been done as a system of conceptual metaphors which are conventionalized. Analysis of the English discourse in question shows that the conceptual metaphor prevalent is the one of Time is Money, with the English language structures also being conceived of the multi-faceted approach conceptual metaphor. Moreover, use of metaphorical frames gives significant information regarding values and priorities instead of merely stating the character and gravity of the issue<sup>[43, 44]</sup>.

Research on the linguistic aspects of environmental discourse in English has focused on the following topics: conceptual framing, metaphorical framing, axiological framing, evaluative prosody, lexical choice, policy and media response, public engagement, education, and methodological considerations. Such research makes evident an extraordinary variety of trends, schools, and topics that are simultaneously well established by the community and broadly relevant to contemporary society. It thus supports, complements, and strengthens the episteme of eco-linguistics<sup>[45]</sup>.

## 11. Conclusion

Spurred by growing awareness of climate change and environmental degradation, eco-linguistics has emerged as a particularly urgent branch of study in the field of applied linguistics. Key themes include the way language and linguistics conceptualize, construct, and mediate human interactions with the physical environment, and the extent to which the ways in which these environmental issues are branded, framed, and represented determine the nature of the interactions themselves. These studies orbit around the well-known quote of Whorf, that we cut nature up, tie it about, and put it in dictionaries, and have discussed very diverse environmental issues, including climate change and waste, biodiversity loss, pollution, and extinction. However, although systematic com-parative studies of English and environmental semantics are still very scarce, eco-linguistic literature points out such critical issues about environmental discourse in terms of framing, metaphors, semantics, and discourse that can, nevertheless, be tackled in multiple varieties of Englishes.

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