Corpus-Assisted Ecolinguistics
Bloomsbury Advances in Ecolinguistics

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Bloomsbury Advances in Ecolinguistics emerges at a time when businesses, universities, national governments and many other organisations are declaring an ecological emergency. With climate change and biodiversity loss diminishing the ability of the Earth to support life, business leaders, politicians and academics are asking how their work can contribute to efforts to preserve the ecosystems that life depends on.
This book series explores the role that linguistics can play in addressing the great challenges faced by humanity and countless other species. Although significant advances have been made in addressing social issues such as racism, sexism and social justice, linguistics has typically focused on oppression in human communities and overlooked other species and the wider ecosystems that support life. This is despite the disproportionate impact of ecological destruction on oppressed groups. In contrast, this book series treats language as an intrinsic part of both human societies and wider ecosystems. It explores the role that different areas of linguistic enquiry, such as discourse analysis, corpus linguistics, language diversity and cognitive linguistics can play at a time of ecological emergency.

The titles explore themes such as the stories that underpin unequal and unsustainable industrial societies; language contact and how linguistic imperialism threatens the ecological wisdom embedded in endangered languages; the use of linguistic analysis in ecocriticism, ecopsychology and other ecological humanities and social sciences; and emerging theoretical frameworks such as Harmonious Discourse Analysis. The titles also look to cultures around the world for inspirational forms of language that can lead to new stories to live by. In this way, the series contributes to linguistic theory by placing language fully in its social and ecological context, and to practical action by describing the role that linguistics can play in addressing ecological issues.
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The exploitation and destruction of the environment continues essentially unheeded despite compelling and overwhelming evidence of the climate crisis and its varied consequences for peoples, nonhuman animals, and ecosystems around the world. In recent years, wildfires in Australia and across the American West start more frequently, burn more widely, and seem to even devour landscapes and communities with greater ferocity (Lindenmayer & Taylor, 2020; Patel, 2018). Over the same period, the Amazon region continues to burn at an alarming rate as loggers, ranchers, and others push the forest to a dangerous tipping point from which recovery may not be possible (Goodman & Giles, 2020). Additionally, severe coastal and inland flooding with climate crisis links grows more frequent (Seneviratne et al., 2012) while devastating hurricanes and typhoons with similar climate change connections occur with worrisome and growing regularity (Geophysical Fluid Dynamics Laboratory, 2021). This is hardly new information as numerous reports, studies, documentaries, and books from Bill McKibben’s *The End of Nature* (1989) in the late 1980s to David Wallace-Wells’ more recent *The Uninhabitable Earth: Life after Warming* (2020) describe in tragic detail the extent of the ecological crisis which the world now faces. It is undeniably clear that human action, and our inaction as well, continues to have significant and potentially irreversible impacts on ecosystems worldwide. As Jack E. Davis writes in his history of the Gulf of Mexico: “We still insist on harnessing it [the environment] to our will, as we perpetuate waste and blight in the natural world” (Davis, 2017, p. 9). Concerned citizens inspired by activists such as Greta Thunberg are increasingly unifying and demanding action, yet the reality is that the global community has done little to produce the transformational change necessary to ensure long-term ecological sustainability and well-being for human and nonhuman species on the planet.

Though applied linguists and ecolinguists may not be seen as key contributors to solving the ecological crisis, one of the most esteemed linguists of the past fifty years, M.A.K. Halliday, argued otherwise. For Halliday (1990/2001), addressing the ecological crisis is not solely a task for the chemists, biologists, and scientists—rather, it is a great challenge that all within the academy and beyond must urgently face, for it is too severe to be engaged by only a few. The crisis
calls for increased trans-disciplinary, trans-agency, and trans-governmental action that expands and extends existing research and action capacities in order to enable “new forms of activity” (Halliday, 1990/2001, p. 176). The climate crisis is truly an “All hands on deck!” scenario in far greater orders of magnitude than other endeavors to circumnavigate the world, put a human on the moon, or solve the ozone crisis, to name only a few. And clearly, the consequences of continued inaction in the face of climate collapse for all of Earth’s inhabitants are catastrophic.

Ecolinguists and scholars across the environmental humanities have contributed greatly to our understanding of language and its role in mediating our perceptions and understanding of the environment and environmental issues. However, ecolinguistics, in my view, has been limited by its somewhat narrow concentration on environmental communication alone. Drawing from Naess’ distinction of shallow and deep ecology (1995), we may analogize this historical focus on language specifically about the environment as a sort of shallow ecolinguistics for the language under observation is immediately and explicitly recognizable as concerning the environment. Though the connotation of shallow may feel pejorative in this case, that is neither my desire nor intent. This book is greatly indebted to the extensive and valuable research on greenspeak, a term coined by Harre, Brockmeir, and Mühlhäusler to refer to language use specifically about the environment and environmental issues (1998). Indeed, analyses of greenspeak have yielded numerous insights into the patterns of language that reflect and perpetuate troubling conceptualizations of and problematic actions toward the environment, yet it is the language of popular and prevailing discourse that must be investigated for it is in these spaces where our ways of existing in and perceiving the world are profoundly and covertly enmeshed. There, in the language of the everyday, our attitudes and beliefs are manipulated and manufactured, and the systems and ideologies which perpetuate ecological degradation are normalized and reproduced. Thus, this book aims to forward a broader vision of ecolinguistics, a vision that goes beyond the study of greenspeak to the interrogation of language and discourses not actually about the environment in an immediate sense but which nonetheless function to reproduce, normalize, and perpetuate a range of ideologies, practices, beliefs, and attitudes that are harmful to sustainability and ecological well-being.

Such a call for ecolinguistic-informed analysis of discourses more broadly is not novel, and this book will not be the first to propose such an expanded vision for ecolinguistics. Notably, Alexander and Stibbe (2014) forwarded a similar call to move beyond ecological discourse analysis (i.e., the analysis of
greenspeak) to the ecological analysis of discourses—this book is informed by and indebted to their work. However, this book is innovative in its application of techniques from corpus-assisted discourse studies to this broader ecolinguistic mission and framework. It is the aim of this text to illustrate the affordances of corpus-assisted discourse studies for the advancement of this wider vision for ecolinguistics. It is my belief that ecological interrogations of discourses beyond greenspeak will reveal the ways in which everyday language and communication reflect and reproduce the conditions and relationships underlying the present ecological crisis.

As evident in the title, this book aims to foster greater connection between ecolinguistics and corpus-assisted discourse study. It may be true that some ecolinguists conduct research in ecological discourse analysis but are somewhat unfamiliar with using corpora and implementing corpus techniques. It is also possible that these ecolinguists have concerns for what may seem the quantitative or technical aspects of corpus linguistics. This book attempts to address these concerns and relieve these worries. Similarly, there are perhaps readers conducting corpus-assisted analyses of academic writing, business communication, political discourse, and many other texts, genres, or discourses of interest. These applied linguists, though quite familiar with the principles and techniques of corpus-assisted discourse study, may be yet unacquainted with the domain of ecolinguistics. To these readers, I hope the book will inspire you to take your own ecological turn and pursue research which contributes positively to ecological well-being and sustainability for your communities. And finally, for readers from other disciplinary orientations and backgrounds, I hope this text will pique your interests and meet your expectations and that it will inspire you to critique the role of language in the ecological crisis and contribute new ways of thinking, new forms of acting, and new modes of being for an ecologically sustainable civilization.

Ecosophy

Before proceeding, it is necessary for me to make known my own positionality within this research enterprise in the form of an ecosophy. I am neither a distant nor wholly impartial observer for I too live on this planet, and I too feel the great burden of our present ecological crisis. As Bang and Døør assert, “We have no access to a point of view from nowhere” (1993, p. 10). This assertion reflects our positionality as citizens and scholars and how our own backgrounds,
experiences, and values inform and influence how we perceive and interpret the world about us.

An ecosophy is an ethical framework which reflects and expresses the values of the researcher (see Stibbe 2015, 2021 for a more detailed discussion), and in ecolinguistics, forming and stating one’s own ecosophy has become common practice. Importantly, an ecosophy is greater than a commentary on one’s own ecological identity, beliefs, and values, for it also serves as the ethical and moral framework by which one may subsequently evaluate discourses as positive and beneficial or negative and destructive. In essence, when language use transgresses the values of my ecosophy, it shall be critiqued and challenged. For example, the reporting of nonhuman animal escapes in Chapter 5 demonstrates such a negative discourse deserving of critique. In contrast, when language use promotes ways of thinking and being that align with the framework, as in the illustration of Chapter 4, it will be praised and promoted. Though your ecosophy may diverge from my own, it is important that we all formulate an ecosophy to inform and guide our practice.

The following are the pillars of my ecosophy:

- **Well-being:** I am an advocate for the well-being of all human and nonhuman animals as well as of forests, lakes, rivers, oceans, and all ecosystems large and small. As Stibbe (2021) writes, “The goal is not just living in the sense of survival but living well” (p. 15). I similarly advocate for such a standard of life that makes life worth living for all species, and thus, I oppose practices that normalize and perpetuate inequality, oppression, and suffering and that do not contribute to the well-being of all species.

- **Justice:** For there to be well-being, there must also be justice. As the effects of the climate crisis increasingly materialize, it will be marginalized peoples and communities that will most significantly feel the effects of climate change. It is unjust that the excessive consumption and waste by the few should cause the suffering of the many. My calls for justice extend also to nonhuman animals and their right to life and well-being.

- **Awakening and Transformation:** Aspirational and optimistic, I believe an awakening is possible and that through revealing and challenging the practices, attitudes, and beliefs that contribute to the ecological crisis, transformational change is still achievable. This hope in the potential for transformation is not meant to deny the severity of the crisis nor project a flawed belief that life as we know it can carry on largely unchanged. It cannot. Radical change and comprehensive transformation will only be
possible if we rethink and restructure how we perceive, exist, and engage with and in the natural world. Such transformation will not be the result of shallow behavioral modifications that many global citizens have already adopted and integrated into their daily routines. In other words, while banning plastic straws and installing energy-efficient light bulbs are ecologically positive actions, the impact such actions produce is minimal in the face of ongoing political indifference and continued environmental crime and injustice. The COVID-19 pandemic has caused many to pause and bear witness to the changes in the global environment and the pervasiveness of inequality and injustice around the world. In a meta-analysis of research assessing the environmental impact of COVID-19, data indicated that air quality improved in many of the world’s cities, greenhouse gas emissions declined, and water pollution decreased during the first year of the pandemic (Rume & Islam, 2020). This is evidence that behavior change is possible and that such transformation can indeed produce demonstrable environmental benefits. Transformation is achievable, and thus, I seek to challenge language practices that forestall such development and promote an awakening to discourses which contribute to sustainability and well-being.

- Compassion: Compassion and empathy for the lived conditions of humans and nonhuman species are required for transformational change.
- Sustainability: Sustainability now makes possible the achievement of alternative futures for generations that follow.

Notes on terminology:

1. **Climate crisis and ecological crisis**: These terms are used interchangeably to indicate not just the direct issue of climate change but all ecological issues that influence well-being.
2. **Nonhuman animal and animal**: In the text, I generally use the term “nonhuman animal” in order to challenge constructs that separate humans from other species. However, at times, I do use both terms out of concern for concision and to avoid excessive repetition that may become bothersome for the reader.
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List of Abbreviations

BNC: British National Corpus
CADS: Corpus-Assisted Discourse Studies
CDS: Critical Discourse Studies
CL: Corpus Linguistics
COCA: Corpus of Contemporary American English
COHA: Corpus of Historical American English
NOW: News on the Web Corpus
An Introduction to Ecolinguistics and Corpus-Assisted Discourse Study

1.0 Introduction

This chapter briefly introduces ecolinguistics, corpus linguistics, corpus-assisted discourse studies (CADS), and critical discourse studies (CDS) to provide the historical, theoretical, and methodological foundations for corpus-assisted ecolinguistics as pursued in the balance of this text. Though many of the concepts of this opening chapter are revisited more deeply in later chapters, the discussions here provide a necessary foundation to the multiple research traditions and approaches informing this text's approach to corpus-assisted ecolinguistics. In closing, the chapter outlines the organization of the book and provides brief summaries of each chapter.

1.1 Defining Ecolinguistics

The word formation process which blends ecology and linguistics seems rather clear and transparent, yet defining and delimiting the resulting term has not been so easily achieved historically. An early definition of ecolinguistics established the field as one focused upon “the study of interactions between any given language and its environment” (Haugen, 1972/2001, p. 325). One may imagine a research enterprise reflective of this term, but it is quite likely the imagined research agenda would not capture the diversity of methods, approaches, and domains of application this definition has stimulated. Ecolinguistics, as pursued by this text, emerges from this early definition from Einar Haugen but more closely aligns with a research tradition which explores how language mediates and shapes how people think about and engage with physical spaces, nonhuman animals, and the environment generally. Ecolinguistics, in this tradition, thus, takes
the position that “perceptions of nature are mediated through language and that in turn such perceptions and lifestyles feed back into the structure of discourse” (Mühlhäusler, 2003, p. 12). While Haugen’s aforementioned conceptualization motivates “deeper reflections on the theories of language inspired by a holistic paradigm of ecology,” this second discourse-focused strand of ecolinguistics applies a range of discourse analytic methods to the analysis of language use of ecological relevance and importance (Bang & Trampe, 2014). Most frequently in this discourse analytic tradition, at times referred to as ecological discourse analysis (EDA), researchers analyze features of the language system which produce an “unecological fragmentation” between humans and the environment (Fill & Mühlhäusler, 2001, p. 6). Essentially, ecolinguistics interrogates the “role of language in the life-sustaining interactions of humans, other species, and the physical environment” (International Ecolinguistics Association, 2019).

The underlying theoretical rationale informing research in the field aligns with a post-structuralist, constructivist notion that views language as mediating how we think and perceive, and therefore how we act and engage with/in the world. Though this rationale is shared with much critical discourse analytic work across the social sciences, ecolinguistics is unique for its particular focus on and critique of “forms of language that contribute to ecological destruction” (Stibbe, 2015, p. 1). While this may seem rather deterministic to some, ecolinguists believe language indeed has a contributing role to our ecological crisis. Such a theoretical orientation conflicts with structuralist beliefs of language that see the language system as simply encoding and reflecting an objective, preexisting reality. Ecolinguists view such an orientation to language and its use as flawed and insufficient, instead seeing language from a Hallidayan perspective as a complex semiotic system for construing reality and worldviews, not a system for capturing an external, objective truth. For ecolinguistics, language is constitutive for it both reflects and builds reality.

To exemplify this constitutive view of language use with samples from modern prevailing discourse is not particularly challenging as many such instances are present in mainstream communication. Though the previous discussion may feel esoteric, its essential thesis is reflected in evolving language use throughout society. For example, a sort of language engineering has occurred that has de-gendered such titles as chairman and policeman for the more inclusive chairperson and police officer. That change both reflects reality as more women occupy such positions, but it also builds such a reality by producing a cognitive space that views gender equality as preferable and such positions
as achievable occupational goals for all genders. Similarly, the historically dominant use of masculine pronouns in science and academic writing has essentially disappeared in these respective discourse communities over the past few decades. There is also the campaign forwarded by Facebook executive Cheryl Sandberg to stop people from describing women and girls as bossy for actions their male counterparts are deemed assertive and praised for leadership. A view that language is an arbitrary system for encoding a preexisting reality would seemingly not object to the ascription of bossy, the gendering of titles, etc. In contrast, the critical discourse analyst argues that the ascription of the label reflects attitudes and beliefs about gender roles shared in a community or culture, but, and most profoundly, it normalizes and perpetuates such systems, thus reconstituting the system for years to come. In addition to critiquing the linguistic practice under inquiry, much critical discourse analysis seeks to motivate awareness of and ultimately change linguistic practices that normalize and perpetuate marginalization, exploitation, and inequality, a mission that is shared by ecolinguistics but extended to the physical environment and nonhuman species as well.

Though the aforementioned examples are not of immediate ecological relevance, this book explores similar linguistic practices that influence our conceptualization of and actions toward the environment. Ecolinguistics extends the scope of inquiry to discourses of nonhuman animals, depictions of physical spaces, representations of the climate crisis, and beyond. Through such work, ecolinguistics aims to challenge language patterns and practices that (re)produce attitudes, beliefs, identities, and ideologies which contribute to ecological destruction or identify and promote those practices that contribute to well-being and sustainability (Stibbe, 2015).

1.2 A Brief History of Ecolinguistics

It is worthwhile to look back at the field’s origins in the nineteenth century through its development to the present. In a field so intimately focused on emergence and interconnection, a general orientation to the field’s philosophical, scientific, and theoretical genesis seems quite necessary. Undoubtedly, some may tell a different history with different key figures and alternative points along their timeline, and readers are encouraged to review other histories of the field written previously (e.g., do Couto, 2014; LeVasseur, 2015; Mühlhäusler, 2003; Steffensen & Fill, 2014). This brief review begins with the brothers Alexander von Humboldt and
Wilhelm von Humboldt before moving to Charles Darwin and Ernst Haeckel. In the nineteenth century, few people were likely as well known around the world as Alexander von Humboldt, Charles Darwin, and Ernst Haeckel (Wulf, 2015). While we know them for their immense scientific contributions, their work underpins the theoretical and philosophical foundation of language ecology and ecolinguistics. From these figures of the nineteenth century, this history moves more rapidly through a series of key figures of the twentieth century before exploring more recent work central to the field today.

In 1807, the German naturalist, geographer, and explorer Alexander von Humboldt published Essays on the Geography of Plants in which he depicted in the sketch Ein Naturgemälde der Anden the interconnectivity and interrelatedness of all elements of the physical world. His transformational work is generally unknown in the modern world, but his radical rethinking of nature continues to exert immense influence on science and modern thought (Wulf, 2015). Though he did not coin the term ecology—the coinage is attributed to Ernst Haeckel—Alexander von Humboldt’s views on the unity and interconnectedness of nature are the theoretical and philosophical genesis of ecology. Some may point to the inspirational image of The Blue Marble captured from the window of Apollo 17 for awakening modern ecological consciousness, but Humboldt’s Naturgemälde from well over 100 years before the iconic Blue Marble image was the first to assert and inspire the conceptualization of an interconnected ecological system. In his work, he asserted a comprehensive, dynamic, and holistic view of nature as a complex and interactive system, a view which would later influence renowned naturalists such as John Muir, Henry David Thoreau, and George Perkins Marsh (Wulf, 2015).

Amazingly, Alexander von Humboldt was only one member of his family whose intellectual work would contribute to ecology. While Alexander expanded our conceptualization of the interconnectedness of the physical world, it was his brother, Wilhelm von Humboldt, who began to bridge ecological thinking with linguistic theory and analysis. Serving as an important precursor to the more well-known work of Edward Sapir and Benjamin Whorf, Wilhelm von Humboldt asserted that language must be more carefully studied in relation to context and culture for he argued variations in grammar reflects different views of reality (Swan, 2011; Wulf, 2015). Quite radical at the time, Wilhelm claimed that every language encodes a particular worldview and that language is not simply a tool for communication but that it actually functions to shape thought (Wulf, 2015). As captured in Andrea Wulf’s biography of Alexander, the terminology used by the two brothers for
describing nature and language were often the same, and they undoubtedly influenced each other’s thinking.

Though Alexander von Humboldt’s work was undeniably influential and would shape and inform the thinking of many of the great environmental writers of the next hundred years, the term *oecology*, which evolved to *ecology*, was first used by the German zoologist Ernst Haeckel in the 1866 monograph *Generelle Morphologie der Organismen (General Morphology of Organisms)* (Kingsland, 1991, p. 1) in an attempt to capture and explain the complex relationships Charles Darwin elaborated in his 1859 *On the Origin of Species* (from Macintosh, 1985, cited by Kingsland, 1991, p. 1). This coinage and his work helped launch Ecology as a science made distinct through its “application of experimental and mathematical methods to the analysis of organism-environment relations, community structure and succession, and population dynamics” (Kingsland, 1991, p. 2). In the decades following Darwin’s classic text and Haeckel’s elaboration, naturalists, botanists, and zoologists took a more “rigorous approach to natural history” (p. 2) and at the turn of the twentieth century, the domain of Ecology was described as a “dynamic, experimental approach to the study of adaptation, community succession, and population interactions” (Kingsland, 1991, p. 2). Increasingly, an ecology-driven approach was adopted by prominent naturalists in the United States who rejected more traditional, descriptive methods for the more quantitative and theoretical principles offered by the emerging science. In this time, Stephen Forbes published “The Lake as Microcosm” (1887), a seminal article that remains a frequently cited piece in ecology. In this piece, Forbes developed the conceptualization of the complex, interrelated interactions present within an ecosystem.

While scholars often apply metaphors, approaches, and theories from other fields and shape and transform them in a manner useful and insightful for their own pursuits, few seem to be so apt to borrow as language studies and linguistics. Ecology is one such example. Linguists in the early 1900s were beginning to extrapolate principles of ecology for language theory as the complexity of language and its interrelationship with people, places, culture, and thought was increasingly observed. The first applications of ecology to language through works of Franz Boaz, Edward Sapir, Benjamin Lee Whorf, and Charles and Florence Voegelin would emerge in the southwest of the United States.

While the roots of Ecology are undoubtedly European in origin, Sapir’s work in the American southwest is often regarded as foundational in the area of language ecology. In Sapir’s well-known and ultimately quite controversial essay “Language and Environment” (1912/2001), he cautioned against producing a view of human