



## QUO VADIS ECOLINGUISTICS?

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**Abstract:** The genre of this paper is *aalpiri* (Australian Western Desert languages for 'morning growl') and it spells out the reasons why have been less than happy with the way ecolinguistics has developed in recent years. In my opinion, ecolinguistics does not live up to the expectations of its founders and the whole enterprise is far less than the sum of its parts. Much of ecolinguistics is driven by ideology rather than rigid scholarly research and its efficacy leaves much to be desired. The title suggests that ecolinguists have to reflect on where they are going.

**Key words:** State of ecolinguistics. Efficacy. Ecolinguistic methodology. Possible future directions.

**Resumo:** O gênero deste ensaio é *aalpiri* (palavra das línguas do Deserto Ocidental da Austrália para 'rosnado matutino'); ele expressa os motivos porque tenho estado longe de ser feliz com a direção que a ecolinguística tomou nos últimos anos. Na minha opinião, a ecolinguística não atende as expectativas de seus fundadores e toda a empreitada está longe de ser a soma de suas partes. Muita ecolinguística é movida por ideologia em vez de sê-lo por uma sólida pesquisa acadêmica, de modo que sua eficácia deixa muito a desejar. O título sugere que os ecolinguistas precisam refletir sobre para onde estão indo.

**Palavras-chave:** Estado da ecolinguística. Eficácia. Metodologia ecolinguística. Possíveis direções futuras.

### 1. Introduction

A few years ago, whilst on my 18th fieldtrip to study the Norfolk language, spoken at Norfolk Island by the descendant of the Mutiny on the Bounty, I was honored with an invitation to join the Grumpy Old Men's table at one of the local hotels where I could participate, over a few beers, in discussing island matters with older locals. I am sorry that I cannot personally participate at this Fourth International Conference on Ecolinguistics as I would have loved to initiate a grumpy old ecolinguists' table.

There are two words in the Western Desert Languages of Central Australia that I have found particularly impressive. One of these is aalpiri, 'the practice of old men getting up in the morning and airing all their grievances to the whole camp in a loud voice' (a practice referred to as 'morning growl' in anthropological literature). It might be more useful to growl about the many disappointments of ecolinguistics than trying to create a mutual admiration society of enlightened scholars meeting on the moral high-ground.

The second expression of Western Desert language is ninti, which translates as 'to know because one does it'; there are no translation equivalents for English 'to know' in the sense of theoretical or abstract knowledge. The main achievement of many linguists, knowing a language without actually being able to use it, makes no sense in a language like Yankunytjatjara. Applied to ecolinguistics, this means: the discipline would benefit if its practitioners actually had practical experience in agriculture, animal husbandry, writing environmental impact statements, language revival, ecotourism, economics, and numerous more practical fields. I know that some of my colleagues have dirtied their hands in such fields, but many ecolinguists gain their insights from philosophical argumentation and from analyzing representations and models rather than realities.

To be able to become a genuine multidisciplinary enterprise additionally would require knowing linguistics and anthropology (in the sense of having worked empirically with as many languages and cultures as possible), philosophy of science, astrophysics, chemistry and more. Rom Harré, with whom I worked for many years, and co-authored Greenspeak (1999) came close to being the kind of renaissance figure capable of a genuine interdisciplinary perspective. He grew up on a farm in New Zealand and worked as a nuclear physicist, musicologist, psychologist, sociologist, philosopher of science and linguist. He nevertheless felt it necessary to seek the cooperation of others when it came to think through complex matters such as the relationship of language and the

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world. Papers in the 'hard' sciences often have a whole string of co-authors, ecolinguistic papers do not. The recent Routledge Handbook of Ecolinguistics (Fill and Penz, 2018) contains almost exclusively single-author papers and, when examining the references at the end of such papers, one again finds predominantly single-author sources. As this handbook is meant to reflect the state of the art in ecolinguistics I will scrutinize it in some detail. Here follow some of the issues I have identified as being worth growling about.

### 2. The absence of topic diversity

Konrad Lorenz (1982), founder of modern ethology, identified 'eight deadly sins of civilized mankind':

- Overpopulation
- Destruction of the natural environment
- Intra-species competition
- Loss of human emotions
- Genetic deterioration
- Loss of tradition
- Susceptibility to indoctrination
- Nuclear weapons

All of these would seem to be legitimate subjects of inquiry for ecolinguistics. Fill and Penz, in their introduction to the Ecolinguistics Handbook (2018), identify merely two problems that ecolinguistics seeks to solve:

- The loss of the world's linguistic diversity (= loss of tradition)
- The loss of biodiversity and the degradation of the natural environment (= destruction of natural environment)

This does not bode well for a holistic approach, as there are patent interconnections between some of the parameters identified by Lorenz and the two research priorities mentioned. I have compiled

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a preliminary list of additional topics routinely excluded, for whatever reasons, from ecolinguistic inquiry, including:

- The role of organized crime (e.g. in waste disposal, pushing drugs and alcohol unto Indigenous traditional populations)
- Invisible hand processes that turn local short-term environmental measures into long-term negative outcomes, examples being wind farms and solar panels. Today's solutions may turn out to be tomorrow's problems
- The negative effects of tourism, including eco-tourism
- Migration of human, plant and animal populations -their negative impact on endemic cultures and natural kinds
- Ecological changes of all sorts brought into existence by digital technology
- Military expenditure and conflict
- Detrimental ecological effects of traditional cultural practices such as fire 'management', equating cattle with wealth, holy cows, spread of pest plants and animals by sea-farers such as the Polynesians, deforestation of Easter Island, destruction of megafauna, and many more; how can one reconcile cultural diversity with the well-being of nature?
- The negative and denigrating views on animals in many of the world's major religions
- Negative effects of modern medicine such as the effects of pharmaceuticals on waterways and lakes
- The effects of militant vegetarianism on animal welfare. I remember being given by a well-meaning person a book containing numerous vegetarian dishes recommended for ferrets, animals that need to eat animal proteins and very little else. As portrayed by Christian Morgenstern in his poem *Der Hecht* (The Pike)<sup>1</sup>:

### **Der Hecht**

Ein Hecht, vom heiligen Anton

bekehrt, beschloß, samt Frau und Sohn, am vegetarischen Gedanken  
moralisch sich emporzuranken.

Er aß seit jenem nur noch dies: See gras, Seerose und Seegrieg.

Doch Grieg, Gras, Rose flog, o Graus, entsetzlich wieder hinten aus.

Der ganze Teich ward angesteckt. Fünfhundert Fische sind verreckt. Doch Sankt Anton,  
gerufen eilig, sprach nichts als »Heilig! heilig! heilig!«

### **The Pike**

Converted by St. Anthony a pike and all his family  
embraced with moralistic zeal the vegetarian ideal.

Henceforth the pike would only eat sea grass, sea roses, and sea wheat. But wheat, grass,  
rose did reappear abominably from his rear.

The pond turned wholly poisonous. Five hundred fishes perished thus.

But Anthony, called in distress,

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said nothing but, "God bless! God bless!"

- Environmental discourses as fashions and discourse fatigue: I am old enough to have lived through the age of Waldsterben, global glaciation, ozone discourses on earth and up in heaven, as well as the current global warming discourses.
- Much more attention needs to be given to perception and reception of environmental language. The recipients are often aware that what they read or hear is just bullshit.

You will no doubt be able to add to this list and assess which of these topics need urgent inclusion into the ecolinguistics agenda. I will have little more to say about this point, but focus on the two main questions identified by the compilers of the Handbook.

### 3. What is diversity?

Just as the word 'growth', the word 'diversity' is an instance of lexical under-differentiation. It can mean the kind of diversity of offerings that leads to over-choice, as Toffler (1970) referred to it in *Future Shock*. In the debate about biodiversity and linguistic diversity there is a confusion between diversity and what one could refer to as multiplicity. Both diversity and multiplicity are the outcome of developments over time, with a significant difference. Diversity results from uniformitarian and adaptive changes over long periods of time; multiplicity results from catastrophic processes during a brief period of time. Let us consider diversity of natural lifeforms first. Pitcairn is a volcanic island that came into being about 700,000 years ago. When it was settled by the mutineers of the *Bounty* and their Polynesian entourage in 1790 it had 18 endemic and 98 indigenous vascular plant species. Today there are 264 additional vascular plant species on Pitcairn. Overall, endemic species make up 5%, indigenous species 26% with the remaining species being exotic species introduced in the last **200+** years, (Gothesson, 1997:40-41). The diversity of endemic and indigenous plants is severely threatened by the multiplicity of exotic ones. This rapid increase in lifeform multiplicity is encountered on most small islands in the Pacific. Norfolk Island, where I have been carrying out fieldwork over more than two decades, today features a much larger number of plant and vertebrate species than at the time of Cook's discovery in 1774. However, whilst then one was dealing with a highly structured diversity characterized by interdependence rather than competition; today a vast number of introduced life forms outcompete

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the endemic ones and create an ecology characterized by imbalances and extinction of endemic species and potential ecological disaster. Some introduced species, though not the ones that have utilitarian value, are perceived as a problem, as a significant part of the endemic and native flora and fauna has become endangered or extinct, with less than 5% of the island's original vegetation cover still intact. Meanwhile discourses of unspoilt natural beauty continue to be employed in the developing ecotourism industry of the island.

A similar argument can be made for languages. Linguists, for reasons best known to them, provide a figure of ii languages and 37 dialects of English traditionally spoken in the U.K. Baker et al. (2000) have documented more than 300 home languages in metropolitan London<sup>2</sup>. New waves of migrants and refugees bring further languages with them. There are very few functional links between the various recently introduced languages and their links to the endangered minority languages (such as Gaelic) and dialects (such as Cockney) of Britain are all but non-existent. Similarly, the growing number of migrant languages in Australia has done nothing to arrest the decline of the Indigenous languages. There would seem to be little reason for celebrating 'multicultural diversity'.

It is true that some life forms and languages threatened with extinction in their original ecologies survive in their new exotic environment. Among the animals that Sir George Grey (1812-1898), twice governor and subsequently Premier of New Zealand, introduced from Australia to New Zealand in the 1870s were five species of wallabies. Three of the introduced wallaby species remain and do considerable damage to the native vegetation, thus harming the habitat for these flightless birds and other native fauna. The wallabies destroy all emerging seedling, which means that the present native trees are the last generation. In a number of areas, the usual understory forest species are absent due to wallaby browsing and in many cases the ground is bare. Meanwhile, wallabies in many parts of mainland Australia came close to extinction and two wallaby species that Sir George Grey transferred to his retirement seat Kawau Island - the parma and the brush-tailed rock wallaby- have become valuable conservation resources, for re-introduction to Australia.

### **4. Loss of linguistic diversity**

The question of how many languages are being lost has received many answers. Importantly, to portray language loss or death as the disappearance of well-defined language species is

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misguided. In preliterate societies, the notion of a language is an inadequate descriptor. Attempts to count and catalogue languages are popular and are given respectability by the compilers of the Ethnologue and other language lists. However, as I have tried to show for the languages of Papua New Guinea (Mühlhäusler, 2006), language inventories are highly inconsistent, arbitrary and often at odds with the speakers' own metalinguistic judgements: it is noted that the majority of language names found in language catalogues have been invented by outside language makers.

The problem of language death is not that 50 or 60 or 90% of the languages catalogued and named by linguists in problematic inventories such as Ethnologue will be gone in two generations but:

- that the ecological support systems that underpins a structured diversity of ways of speaking is disappearing in the wake of colonization, modernization and globalization;
- that languages qua named entities may continue to exist but in a modified and changed form. Typically, traditional semantactic patterns become heavily westernized, languages become standard average European (SAE) languages;
- that the rate at which language ecologies disappear and languages become semantically colonized is far greater than the emergence of new ways of speaking.

Ecolinguists at times complain about the fact that environmental processes are reified into nominal expressions, that killing unwanted animals becomes 'pest control' or that pollution and habitat are nouns. Linguists including ecolinguists are very much in the business of reification themselves. People's ways of speaking are converted by abstraction and a range of similar professional practices into entities named 'languages'. Collateral damage is caused by assuming determinate boundaries between what counts as language and what does not, an assumption that disregards the integration of all meaning making behavior. These abstractions that are represented in books titled 'The French Language' 'The Grammar of English' and such like. The criteria for abstracting named languages from ways of speaking are inconsistent and arbitrary, as are the criteria for establishing dialects and other named 'sub varieties' of languages. Haugen (1972), for instance, characterizes the languages of Scandinavia as 'cultural artefacts' brought into being by the establishment of nation states such as Norway and by discursive practices. Linguists may appeal to structural criteria, lexical differences or intelligibility when attempting to identify distinct languages, but ultimately there are no methods reliably to establish the number of languages spoken in any area. The fact that Bosnian, Serbian, Croatian and Montenegrin are recognized languages is not

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based on any reliable linguistic criteria but the consequence of historical contingencies. The listing of 42 named Australian Aboriginal languages for South Australia, similarly, is the outcome of problematic practices by anthropologists such as Tindale (1940) who created the (in)famous language map of Australia, and of subsequent generations of linguists.

I am currently working on an Adnyamathanha (Flinders Ranges of South Australia) revival project, and community members differ in their views as to how many languages are actually subsumed under this label. How many languages have died or are highly endangered is not possible to determine either by linguistic criteria or by asking their speakers. Languages as referred to in the discourse of language death and endangerment are not entities out there discoverable by objective observers but discursive constructs. To speak of English or Hindi or Pitjantjatjara as 'natural languages' or species is unwarranted.

My inaugural lecture in Adelaide in 1993 was titled 'What is the use of linguistic diversity'? One of my principal conclusions that talking about any aspect of the world is a central factor in how humans manage their natural and social environments. A diversity of languages (a concept I still subscribed to in 1993) is required to manage the vast variety of such environments. There are two provisos to this view:

The idea that humans can control their natural environment through the application of appropriate management skills and technology is pervasive ('attitude management', 'effluent management', 'fishery management', 'land resource management', 'responsible management' and even 'wilderness management' and 'climate management'). Note the following quotation:

Everyone these days is or aims to be a manager, and this may be why we talk of managing the whole planet. Could we, by some act of common will, change our natures and become proper managers, gentle gardeners, stewards, taking care of all of the natural life of our planet?' (Lovelock 1992).

With this quote, Lovelock directly challenges the reification of actions and processes, suggesting that humans are agents, whose actions directly affect the planet. Implicit within this challenge for humans to become 'planet managers' is the assumption that humans have the ability, know-how and willpower to take on the task of global management, perhaps thereby supplanting the role of a deity." As far as I am concerned, I hold out little hope for climate management, desirable as it might be.



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Among the diversity of human forms of speech there are many that do not privilege cause-effect discourses and for whom the notion of management makes no sense. Many Australian Aboriginal languages, for instance, talk about the world in terms of inherent causes. Western Desert dwellers frequently appeal to the term tjaka 'these are what they are - there is nothing one can change'. Their ergative languages privilege a discourse of experience and living with over a discourse of human agency. From their perspective, weather and climate is inherently changeable and humans have to learn to adapt to such changes, as Aborigines have indeed been able to during their long presence in Australia.

There are other 'uses' of linguistic diversity such as maintaining a sense of identity that can underpin well-being and social cohesion, providing multiple perspectives on the world, providing multiple heuristic strategies for exploring the world such as metaphors (Mühlhäusler 1995, Idstrom et al 2012), reducing conflict in many traditional linguistic ecologies (Mühlhäusler 1997) and many others.

For more than twenty-five years, I have been actively involved in helping traditional communities maintain and revive their languages. It is a very difficult undertaking, comparable to trying to fertilize the Sahara with mouse droppings, and one whose long-term success is far from certain. Based on these experiences, I have come to the conclusion that the principal tasks for those involved in preventing or turning around the loss of the world's linguistic diversity are:

- . to identify those factors that sustain linguistic diversity in particular language ecologies;
- . to identify possible new ecological support systems for endangered ways of speaking. As can easily be seen, these support systems can vary greatly and what sustains one language, e.g. literacy, language testing or a language academy may be irrelevant or even detrimental to sustaining other ways of speaking. In my experience writing systems are by far the most sensitive and difficult aspect of language revival. Ecolinguists are referred to Barton's (1994) book on the Ecology of Written Language;
- . to understand what structural and socio-historical properties make some languages more vulnerable than others;
- . to create awareness and appreciation of the importance of linguistic diversity among all stakeholders.

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The repertoire or ways of speaking found in different parts of the world is best characterized as an ecological phenomenon in the sense that different ways of speaking are chosen in response to different external /ecological parameters. They include both the social ecology (how to speak with different addressees or different social settings) and natural ones (e.g. which language is needed or tied to a particular place). There is a reciprocal relationship between ways of speaking and the wider ecology in which these ways are embedded. Speaking brings into being and sustains social practices, the management of natural resources and views about the world. Conversely, such practices and the world around languages sustain ways of speaking. It is of utmost importance when talking about the question of language death to ask what is the ecological support system that sustains certain ways of speaking.

The standard explanations for language death typically under-estimate the complexity of the ecological systems for preserving ways of speaking and a tendency to over-emphasize generalities to the virtual exclusion of singular facts.

### **5. Ecolinguists's privileging of moral discourse**

In *Greenspeak*, Rom Harré and I distinguished between moral, scientific, economic and aesthetic discourses about the environment and noted numerous incompatibilities between them. My readings lead me to believe that there is an imbalance between these discourses in ecolinguistics, with the moral discourse dominating.

One example is the topic of food and its origins. Here greenspeaking clearly enters the discourse of morality (Marko, 2000). In a world with pockets of famine and drought, the use of water and land to produce foodstuffs can become a morally contested issue if one group believes there is a more productive way to use available resources to feed more humans at less cost to the environment. Product-labelling in reference to meat adds a further dimension to this ideological discourse. Meat itself may be referred to as 'animal product', 'corpse', 'protein food' and so on. Within this spectrum lie further ideological choices to do with meat production such as 'free-range', 'hormone-free', 'halal', 'GM-free', 'ecokosher', 'cruelty-free', 'farm-killed', and so on.

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Having grown up in a hunting family and being a venisarian (someone who chooses wild meat over farmed meat), I have fond memories of Alwin Fill taking the participants of the Graz Symposium to a restaurant that served venison.

### 6. Anthropocentrism

Konrad Lorenz, in his important monograph *Die Rueckseite des Spiegels* (1973), uses the mirror as a metaphor of the human brain. A mirror reflects the part of the stream of information from the outside world it is able to "see". Merely looking into the mirror from the outside ignores the fact that the mirror has a non-reflecting side, which is also a part of reality. The backside of the mirror was created by evolution to gather as much information needed better to survive. Cultural evolution has developed tools that transform the most needed of the invisible to something visible. To avoid anthropocentrism, the act of seeing oneself in this mirror, requires many tools, far more than customarily used by ecolinguists.

Some ecolinguists wish to reduce the amount of anthropocentrism in languages such as English and German. Would they also wish to clean up the many traditional endangered tribal languages that are full of anthropocentric expressions and where nature is talked about in utilitarian terms?

There is a tendency in most languages I have worked with to equate the notion of 'environment' with what sustains human life and what pleases humans. Most discourses are anthropocentric, most discourses are focused on local concerns and issues covering no more than a human life span. Most discourses also assume the desirability of the survival of humanity in spite of the highly dubious record humans have had on the rest of life on earth. After all, humans depend on plants and animals but not vice versa. Humans share about 50% of their genes with bananas (which makes eating a banana an act of semi-cannibalism) and a large proportion of human biomass consists of bacteria. The show would go on if humans disappeared from the face of the earth. It is perfectly natural to become extinct.

### 7. Poverty of analytic tools

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I define a theory as 'an explicit, structured, falsifiable bunch of prejudices.' Like methods and techniques, theories are research tools, not iconic images of the nature of the subject matter. As such they are not true or false but useful or not useful. As someone who has more than 150 different screw drivers in his workshop, I maintain that one often needs to have a number of tools to get a job done. I also note that the best tool for one job may be useless for another one. I have never found any of my screwdrivers particularly useful for opening beer bottles. Therefore, the first stage of any inquiry is to understand what the research questions are and select the tools accordingly. Whilst I have argued that there should be many more research questions than the two identified in the *Handbook*, I shall only briefly comment on what tools have been used to answer these two.

It is said that if your only tool is a hammer the whole world looks like a nail. Ecolinguistics has relied heavily on a small selection of tools, predominant among them critical discourse analysis. Critique of language has a long tradition and predates Fairclough's efforts (see interview in attachment). One of the more worrying movements in language critique was General Semantics (Korzybski, 1933), which over time developed into a quasi-religion and became one of the strands of thinking that led to Scientology. It is to be hoped that critical discourse analysis will not lead to the development of yet another religion.

Lexicogrammar, ultimately derived from Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG) comes a distant second. One of the key topics in this approach is the question to what extent grammar is congruent with the external world. The notion of grammatical metaphor as manifested in nominalization implies that using an abstract noun such as 'growth' instead of the verb 'grow' is somehow incongruent. I note that languages spoken in areas with a very similar material culture and environmental conditions such as Papua New Guinea can differ considerably in being noun-centered or verb-centered (see Mühlhäusler 2003 :87 -98). Goatley's writings provide a balanced analysis of the tricky question of the match between grammar and the world. Others have been far less balanced, and I note that there is a new religion (*2nd Man United*) aiming to change language from mechanical noun-centric to an organic verb-centric.<sup>3</sup> Both critical discourse analysis and SFG tools are employed to analyze the representation of ecological matters, not ecological phenomena as such.<sup>4</sup>

Ecolinguists at times also display a tendency to subscribe to post-structuralist and postmodern argumentation. I was once asked by a colleague: Are you a postmodernist? In the morning of the

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same day I had treated three of my flock of sheep for fly-strike. My answer was: Anyone who scrapes maggots out of a fly-struck sheep's behind does not believe that everything is discursively constructed.

The linguistics that ecolinguists have tended to use offers few tools for advancing ecolinguistics, as it is based on an ideology of language that excludes or marginalizes most of the parameters needed to get answers. One of the urgent tasks is to devise a linguistics that can handle the indefinitely large number of parameters that impinge on the interrelationship between human communication and the cultural and natural ecologies in which it takes place. My suggestion is to attempt to draw on the findings of Roy Harris's (1979, 1981) integrational linguistics and combine them with Lorenz's ethology - a task that I am too old to undertake.

### **8. Efficacy: impact on linguistics, impact on the world**

What about the greening of the linguistics discipline? Has ecolinguistics made a difference? Arguably much less than it could have. In a conversation with Rom Harré, we noted that, whilst other disciplines had taken aboard the concern we expressed in *Greenspeak*, linguistics has not. With hindsight, it would have been better to argue that language is an ecological phenomenon, intertwined with and part of the world than to treat language as something separate which can be correlated with the world. Eco-linguistics, like socio-linguistics and psycho-linguistics, has been reduced to a hyphenated discipline. Linguistics 'proper' continues to occupy the moral high-ground and continues to claim to be a proper science. However, it is difficult to see how a discipline that confuses representation with the phenomena it purports to represent can claim such a status. Linguistics and eco-linguistics need to pay attention to the discursive practices that underpin their exercise.

One of the outcomes of the greening of linguistics is the emergence of a new applied linguistics, which, according to Halliday (2001), may not hold the key to solving environmental problems. But it is assuredly imperative for us to write instructions for the use of the key. The contribution environmental discourses can make to environmental sustainability is far from obvious. Focusing on the nature of the linguistic code to produce an ecofriendly dialect is unlikely to prove successful.

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Renaming the vulgar names for life forms in the English language of the eighteenth century and replacing them with scientific ones did little to improve Britain's natural environment.

Green approaches to discourse can promote awareness that the language one uses privileges certain perceptions and actions and that expressing matters differently will privilege others. Which of these discourses is best for the natural environment is not knowable. By the same token, it is unclear what discourses about endangered language ecologies do any lasting work. In any case, one has to ask: Discourse for whom? When advocating support for Aboriginal language revival projects I have found that the only discourse that does any work is an economic one. My cost-benefit analysis of language maintenance in Australia (Mühlhäusler & Damania, 2004) was crucial to attract millions of dollars from the Australian Government for Aboriginal language projects during the last decade. The discourses required when working with communities on language initiatives are very different and range from discourse about social healing to discourses about getting native title benefits. The view that perfection is not in any single entity but requires a diversity of expressions (Harmon, 2002), has featured prominently in theological debates as to whether God has created a perfect world, and constitutes one of the central insights of ecological thinking and should inspire ecological approaches to language.

A large proportion of environmental discourses is best categorized as greenspeaking. Such discourses become a substitute for action. A large-scale survey of environmental discourses I wrote with an anthropologist colleague (Mühlhäusler and Peace, 2006), confirms this finding. In the circumstances we questioned the work that such discourses have done to solve environmental problems. An analysis of such discourses also reveals the loss of illocutionary force of the many 'eco-friendly' expressions used in them, which have become part of the English language in the last so years. This can be characterized as 'semantic bleaching' where words stand for colorless green ideas (Mühlhäusler, 2000). The new genre of greenspeaking has led to a rapid increase in lexical development over the last decades. Whether more green language will become a basis for better environmental practice, or whether it will be yet another verbal substitute for action, remains to be seen.

### **9. Absence of a temporal perspective**

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“Temporality is at the core of language and languaging, but sometimes it seems that ecolinguistics has abandoned the temporal dimension of the discipline” (Steffensen, p.c., 2019).

Like most 'modern' approaches to linguistics from Saussure onwards, ecolinguistics has remained time-poor in spite of the fact that diversity of any kinds the outcome of development over time. I have tried to show the importance of mapping the changes and fluctuations over time when trying to capture the discrepancies between the contours of language and the contours of nature (Mühlhäusler 1996, 2003).

Time is not a culture-neutral concept. The dominance of linear and directional time in global society is firmly established in ecolinguistic discourses. Awareness of cyclical time, by contrast, is rarely in evidence. The lack of attention to natural cyclical processes, combined with the attenuated understanding of deep time and very short time spans distorts many contemporary discourses including the climate, extinction and diversity discourses.

*Greenspeak* (Harré et al., 1999) features a whole chapter on temporal dimensions which, in our view, are a central issue. There is tension between different time orders which is discursively reconciled in environmentalist discourse. “The natural time order is embedded in natural science as the accrediting medium, whereas individual time is accredited within some or other framework of moral (and aesthetic) considerations and imperatives” (p. 136). The importance of understanding the human individual and cultural perceptions of time and how they differ from temporal parameters in nature cannot be overstated. In *Greenspeak* (pp. 128-130) we document how the extinction discourse is rendered problematic by a confusion of different time perspectives. Where no such confusion exists, genuine insights can be gained, an example being Peter Wohlleben's fascinating chapter on the language of trees in *The hidden life of trees* (2016:8): “The leaf tissue sends out electrical signals, just as human tissue does when it is hurt. However, the signal is not transmitted in milliseconds, as human signals are; instead, the plant signal travels at the slow speed of a third of an inch per minute.”

## 10. Conclusions

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The reasons for my morning growl are many first and foremost my belief in academic freedom and my conviction that any discipline needs to reflect on itself and has to undergo a disciplinary crisis. When it comes to ecolinguistics, my conclusion is that such reflections include the following points:

- There is a discrepancy between what ecolinguistics wants to be and what it actually is;
- there is no identifiable set of questions nor is there any attempt to determine what questions have an answer in principle;
- in as much as language is ecologically interconnected with its ecology, the dependence on linguistic approaches that ignore or deny this is counter-productive;
- whilst there are many interesting and deserving papers and books labelled ecolinguistic, the total is much less than the sum of the part;
- the principal activity of ecolinguists is talking about ecological matters rather than exploring how talking is interconnected with them;
- like other branches of linguistics, ecolinguistics privileges production of discourses over perception and reception; it also privileges the analysis of written texts over that of spoken ones, thus continuing the culture-specific scriptism underpinning modern linguistics;
- Moral discourses may give one a warm feeling, but they need to be supplemented with sophisticated scientific and economic discourses. Being a vegetarian or vegan does not necessarily lead to better ecolinguistics;
- There is a danger that ecolinguistics transmogrifies from a scholarly inquiry to a quasi-religion.

Postmodernism and similar philosophies of post-truth are counter-productive. The aim should be to look for truth in the etymological sense of Greek *aletheia*, 'that which is not hidden'. This means that one should employ devices that remove whatever conceals it: Ideology, error, misrepresentation, sloppy thinking and uncritical acceptance of agreed views in a scientific paradigm. In the case of linguistics these include the conduit metaphor of communication (Reddy, 1979) that underpins the majority of ecolinguistic writings. The devices for removing what conceals truth are theories, methods and techniques, all of which are underdeveloped in ecolinguistics.



**11. Appendix: Eco-Rebel's interview with Professor Peter Mühlhäusler**  
(<https://periodicos.unb.br/index.php/erbel/article/view/9906>).

**Notes**

1 <https://krautblog-ufrich.blogspot.com/2015/n/christian-morgenstern-humorist.html>.

2 See also:

<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/educationnews/11761250/More-than-300-different-languages-spoken-in-British-schools-report-says.html>

3 <https://www.2ndmanunited.com/general/moving-language-from-noun-centric-to-verb-centric/>

4 Just a thought: It might be interesting to apply a critical discourse analysis to ecolinguistic discourses!

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