

CHINESE ECOLINGUISTICS: DEVELOPMENT AND CONTRIBUTION TO THE DISCIPLINE

Yafei Pang (Foshan University, PR China)

David W. Marlow (University of South Carolina Upstate, United States)

Abstract: Ecolinguistics is the study of language and language use from an ecological perspective. This study uses the literature on Chinese ecolinguistics collected by the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI; 中国知网) from 1985 to 2021, combined with relevant Western scholarship, to explore the development process and characteristics of Chinese ecolinguistics, as well as the contribution of Chinese ecolinguistics to the entire discipline. The dissemination and popularization of ecolinguistics knowledge will promote the diversified development of languages and the harmonious coexistence between man and nature.

Key-words: Chinese ecolinguistics; trans-cultural communication; localization; Harmonious Discourse Analysis; global human ecological community.

Resumo: A ecolinguística é o estudo da linguagem e do uso da linguagem a partir de uma perspectiva ecológica. Este artigo parte da literatura sobre ecolinguística chinesa coletada pela China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI; 中国知网) de 1985 a 2021, combinada com estudos ocidentais relevantes, a fim de explorar o processo de desenvolvimento e as características da ecolinguística chinesa, bem como sua contribuição para toda a disciplina. A disseminação e

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popularização do conhecimento ecolinguístico promoverá o desenvolvimento diversificado das línguas e a convivência harmoniosa entre o homem e a natureza.

Palavras-chave: Ecolinguística chinesa; comunicação transcultural; localização; Análise do Discurso Harmoniosa; comunicação ecológica humana global.

1. Introduction

Ecolinguistics has been in development for more than 50 years, bringing together scholars from different backgrounds who share concerns about language and environmental issues and combine different theoretical frameworks of linguistics with ecological ones. Simply put, ecolinguistics is the study of language and language use from an ecological perspective (HE WEI; GAO RAN, 2019). At present, there are two main research paths in ecolinguistics (FILL, 2001; FAN JUNJUN, 2005; HAN JUN, 2013). In a written continuation of a 1970 conference paper, Einar (1971) defined language ecology as “the study of interactions between any given language and its environment” and used his model as a metaphor for understanding language in apparent rebuttal of Chomsky’s focus on theoretical idealized competence. In a speech at the International Conference on Applied Linguistics held in Greece 1990, M.A.K. Halliday effectively shifted the focus from metaphor to real life, calling for linguists to explore the role of language in combating the increasing number of environmental problems (1992). These two approaches are not mutually exclusive, but complementary (FILL, 2001).

The vigorous development of ecolinguistics around the world has ignited interest with Chinese scholars. Especially in recent years, ecolinguistics has developed rapidly in China. This paper focuses on the developmental history and characteristics of Chinese ecolinguistics and the contribution of Chinese ecological language to the discipline as a whole, building on the literature on Chinese ecolinguistics collected by the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (中国知网; CNKI).

2. Review Method and Overview

The earliest work by a Chinese scholar in the CNKI databased regarding language ecology in belongs to Zheng Tongtao (1985), followed closely by Li Guozheng (1987, 1991). The scope of this review, therefore, covers the period from 1985 to 2021. In this study, the complete set of literature collected by CNKI (including journal articles, doctoral and master theses, conference papers, and newspapers) has been used as the data source with a matching search for the term Ecolinguistics. To protect against false matches, the subject search has been confirmed manually. Twelve irrelevant documents were removed, leaving a total of 1030 valid documents in the data set. The time distribution of the number of documents is shown in Figure 1.

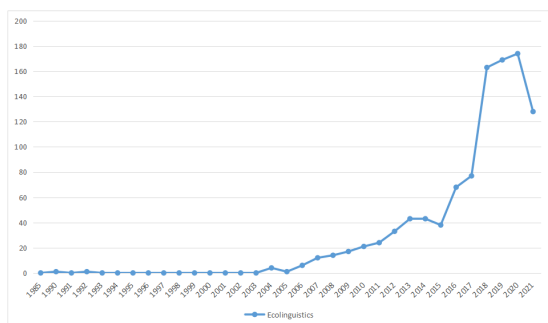


Figure 1: Distribution ecolinguistics documents; 1985-2021

As shown in Figure 1, few articles connected to ecolinguistics appear in China prior to 2006. A slow but steady increase is seen in the decade between 2006 and 2016 and a sharp increase occurs from 2016 to 2020.¹ To ensure that this surge is not a simple manifestation of an overall increase in the number of linguistics articles published during this time, we compare the growth trends of other Western originated linguistic themes: structural linguistics and systemic functional linguistics, as shown in Figure 2.

Here we see that the attention given to structural linguistics in China has been stagnant across the

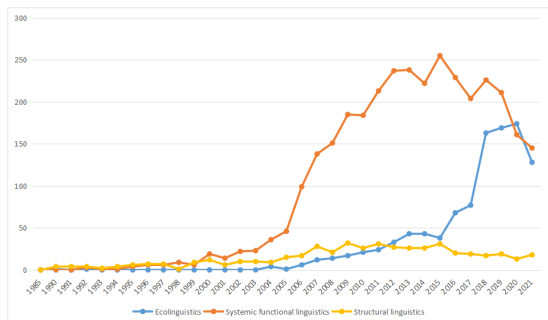


Figure 2: Distribution of articles in the three major Western linguistic schools; 1985-2021

review period with a slight decline from 2005. The volume of articles dealing with systemic functional linguistics clearly surpass those on ecolinguistics from 2003 to 2020 with a peak in 2014 and research interest, as marked by publication numbers, currently on the decline. The basic trend of ecolinguistics has been upward since the turn of the century, with marked expansion from 2016 to 2020. While the

¹ The authors hope the sharp decline in 2021 will be short-lived and reflective of a drop in overall articles published due to the global pandemic rather a lack of interest in ecolinguistics.

attention to other linguistic studies has declined, ecolinguistics has developed rapidly, showing that Chinese scholars have been enthusiastic about ecolinguistics research in recent years.

To provide some level of comparison to the trends in Western publication, we turn to Google's Ngram Viewer which tracks instances of search terms across all materials scanned by Google Books (primarily English, but including texts in Chinese, French, German, Hebrew, Italian,

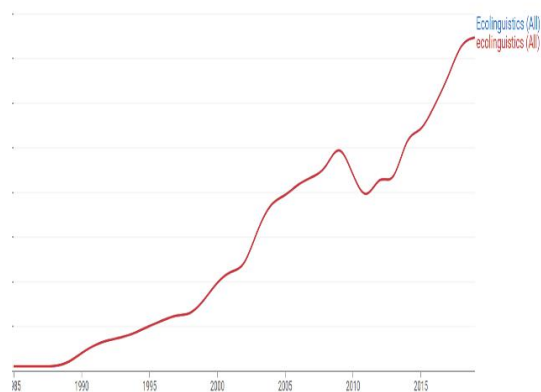


Figure 3: Global references to ecolinguistics over time
Ngram Viewer; 1985 - 2019

Russian, and Spanish). Since the Ngram returns information in percentages rather than pure numbers and cuts off in 2019, direct comparison is not possible, but the results show early uses of the term in the late 1980s and sharp growth through 2019 except for a short decline around 2010. Even without direct comparison, we see that the global focus on ecolinguistics began much earlier and has enjoyed sustained growth across most of this time.

In the remainder of this discussion, we analyze the development process and core themes of Chinese ecolinguistics based on the literature content. To narrow the focus, and to facilitate comparison with Western sources, this discussion is mainly based on 129 articles from Chinese core journal papers and journal papers from CSSCI (Chinese Social Sciences Citation Index; 中文社会科学引文索引).

3. The Development Process and Key Themes in Chinese Ecolinguistics

Discussion on ecolinguistics comes to Chinese linguistics as an import from Haugen and Halliday. When East meets West, blending occurs. Outcomes shift. Insights become deeper and more nuanced. The development of Chinese ecolinguistics can be roughly divided into three stages: the embryonic stage (1985-2003), the learning and exploration stage (2004-2015), and the rapid development through Sino-Western dialogue stage (2016-present). We hope that exploring these stages can provide insight into the greater scope of ecolinguistic studies and how ecolinguists approach and analyze discourse.

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3.1 Germination stage (1985-2003)

The research at this stage is sporadic and isolated. Some authors demonstrate influence from sociolinguistic theories derived in the former Soviet Union, European, and other American structuralist linguistics (e.g., SHU et al., 2009), but most are influenced by Haugen's language ecology metaphor. Early Chinese ecolinguistics, therefore, is mainly based on the Haugen Model, and attempts to extend his approach. For example Zheng Tongtao (1985) introduces the ecolinguistics to China with his exploration symbiotic relationships. Li Guozheng (1991) borrows Western ecosystem theory to study the ecology of Chinese and Chinese characters. Yang Yanli (1999) investigates ethnic minority languages through an ecolinguistic lens, and shortly thereafter Xu Hong and Du Guoying (2002) explore language civilization from the perspective of language ecology. While these contributions are significant, Chinese scholars during this stage employ Western ecolinguistic models to Chinese language and life. They do not contribute to the theoretical framework of ecolinguistics.

3.2 Learning exploration stage (2004-2015)

In 2004, in a move that would invite contribution to the theoretical framework, Chinese scholars Fan Junjun and Gong Qi translated the Austrian linguist Alwin Fill's *Ecolinguistics – State of the Art 1998* into Chinese. In the paper, Fill describes the complementary, though often bifurcated, paths of ecolinguistics following the seminal talks of Haugen in 1970 and Halliday in 1990. Fill's descriptions of Haugen's and Halliday's models have been widely accepted and impactful in China, and the introduction of these concepts into the Chinese academic sphere encouraged many Chinese scholars to pay increasing attention to this new discipline. During this learning and exploration stage, Chinese ecolinguists began to diversify their approaches and offer contributions to the theoretical framework of ecolinguistics.

3.2.1 The promotion of Halliday Model

The most distinct feature of this period is that Chinese scholars use the Halliday Model to explore the role of language in ecological and environmental issues. The number of related papers published increases. Among them, there are theoretical studies on ecolinguistics. Such as Fan Junjun (2005) who, by analyzing and studying the ecological features of language, seeks the interaction between language and environment, shedding light on the non-ecological features of

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language systems and language use. Further, Xin Zhiying et al. (2013) distinguish eco-discourse analysis from critical discourse analysis. Chinese scholars in this period also engage in applied research. Shen Yingmei (2008), for example, suggests that ecolinguistics has brought about great influences on the theories and methodologies in foreign language education. Based on an ecolinguistic interpretation of the nature of language, the author explores three different viewpoints of language education from the aspects of language interaction, cultural diversity, and language environment. During this period, we also find a growing number of reviews, summaries, and translations of book reviews (e.g., WANG JINJUN, 2007). All these approaches combine to enhance people's ecological awareness and their sense of accountability for nature.

3.2.2 Introduction of additional approaches

In addition to Haugen and Halliday, Fill and Mufwene and other famous foreign ecolinguists begin to attract the attention of Chinese academic circles during the learning exploration stage. Wang Jinjun (2007) and Liu Guobing (2009) introduced ecolinguistic scholars Fill, Alexander, and Goatly into the Chinese scholarly sphere in their respective articles. Of particular significance is the introduction of Fill's ecolinguistics website (<http://www.ecoling.net>) and the online journal *Language and Ecology*, edited by Fill and Stibbe. The devotion to critical analysis of discourse about environmental destruction and exploration of discourses in harmony with ecology resonate with traditional Chinese themes and foster a new level of interest and growth in ecolinguistics.

3.2.3 Extensions to related fields

Finally, this period of learning exploration connects ecolinguistics with related disciplines such as the intersection of ecolinguistics and translation (ZU LIJUN, 2007). Zhu Changhe (2008) observes that organically combining the perspectives of cognitive linguistics and ecolinguistics leads to improvement in both as the human application of cognitive linguistics can refine and focus the theoretical basis of ecolinguistics, leading to gains in methodological paradigms through adding significance in terms of human cognition. On the other hand, the natural world proclivity of ecolinguistics can provide a richer factual basis for cognitive linguistics and add value in extending beyond the mind.

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Examination of the English and Chinese language lexical systems reveal that human nature and anthropocentrism are reflected in the structure, morphology and meaning of words of both systems. Since language in turn restricts human perception of the world, analyzing it helps combat the ideological prejudice of language users. Further, Lisheng Li and Xuyang Liu (2011) explore the role of foreign language translation in maintaining cultural and linguistic biodiversity, promoting linguistic innovation and development, and maintaining biodiversity. Toward the end of this period, some scholars have also begun to pay attention to the localization of research in conjunction with ecolinguistics. Zhou Wenjuan (2012), for example, observes that there are three ways to localize ecolinguistics, namely, localization of research consciousness, localization of research content, and localization of research paradigms.

Despite the interest and growth in ecolinguistic scholarship at this stage, in China lacked the support of a native disciplinary system necessary for transformative research. Chinese scholars mostly followed Western thought and sought to apply it to Eastern culture, even as some Western scholars were highlighting the natural connections between ecolinguistic exploration and oriental philosophies (e.g., COUTO, 2013, cited in COUTO, 2021).

3.3 The rapid development through Sino-Western dialogue stage (2016-present)

In 2016, systemic functional linguist Huang Guowen published an influential paper on ecolinguistics entitled, *The Rise and Development of Ecolinguistics* in the journal *Foreign Languages in China* (2016) and in March of the same year gave China's first ecolinguistics lecture at the Hunan University of Technology in a talk with the same title. In succeeding years, he has given more than 20 lectures on this topic at top Chinese universities such as Xi'an Jiaotong University, Beijing Normal University, Beijing Foreign Studies University, and Sun Yat-sen University. More and more Chinese systemic functional linguists have joined the ecolinguistics research team, and Chinese ecolinguistics has entered a period of rapid development. Chinese ecolinguistics no longer simply follows Western scholars, but Chinese and Western ecolinguistics have entered a dialogue stage. The following subsections highlight elements of which set this stage apart from previous stages.

3.3.1 Professionalization of Chinese ecolinguistics

Built on the foundation laid by previous stages of development and the leadership of Huang Guowen, Chinese ecolinguists have created a professional organization, regularly hold conferences, and actively seek dialogue between China and the West. Key organizations that have been created include the Centre for Ecolinguistics, initiated by Professor Huang's team from South China Agricultural University, and the China Association of Ecolinguistics, which was organized by Professor He Wei of Beijing Foreign Studies University.

Between 2017 and 2021, Chinese scholars have held six national ecolinguistics symposiums and five international ecolinguistics symposiums. These meetings bring together the cutting-edge academic research of experts to explore the past and present of ecolinguistics and trends for future development. Further institutionalizing these advancements, a doctoral program in Language Ecology has been launched at the South China Agricultural University. All these initiatives have encouraged and promoted academic exchange surrounding ecolinguistics between China and other countries.

3.3.2 China joins the international scholarly conversation

These advancements have created opportunities for Sino-Western dialogues on ecolinguistics. Chinese scholars now actively engage in dialogues and exchanges between Chinese and Western ecological stories with the world's most influential ecolinguists. For example, in 2016, Huang Guowen (Professor from South China Agricultural University) conducted an academic interview with Fill and Arran Stibbe from the UK. The interview is concerned with issues of ecolinguistics in general and ecolinguistic studies. Also, in 2016, Zhou Wenjuan conducted an academic interview with Alwin Fill at Odense, Denmark. In 2020, He Wei (Professor at Beijing Foreign Studies University) conducted an academic interview with Professor Andrew Goatly, Honorary Professor of Lingnan University, Hong Kong. Each of these conversations contributed not only to the ecolinguistic knowledgebase of Chinese scholars, but also to the awareness of the importance and relevance of the field, thereby encouraging more independent scholarly development within the Chinese academic community. Four Ecolinguistics workshops were held in China from 2017 to 2019 giving linguistics professors and students critical opportunities to gather to learn about ecolinguistics and conduct interdisciplinary research and exploration.

3.3.3. Surge in ecolinguistic scholarly activity

The number of ecolinguistic articles has surged in Chinese journals in recent years. According to our CNKI review, during the six years from 2016 to 2021, a total of 780 journal papers and master and doctoral theses were published on ecolinguistics topics compared to 274 works from the period from 1985-2015, a growth of 400% in just 5 years. Additionally, this period saw a surge in Chinese translations of Western monographs (e.g., CHEN YANG, HUANG GUOWEN, WU XUEJIN, 2019) and book reviews (e.g., HONG DAN, ZENG LEI, 2019; SHEN WEI, 2019) and both categories are still growing steadily. To further encourage interest in ecolinguistics in China, Huang Guowen has also hosted a *Famous Ecological Researchers* column in the comprehensive ecological academic periodical, *Journal of Poyang Lake*, featuring Alwin Fill and Arran Stubbe, which focused on the translation and introduction of Western scholars' opinions on the Haugen Paradigm and Halliday Paradigm as well as Stubbe's Theory of Ecological Discourse Analysis. The introduction of international theorists and their models (HUANG GUOWEN; ZHAO RUIHUA, 2017) encouraged Chinese academics to evaluate their ideas in the Chinese context and build on them to create improved models more suitable to the Chinese context.

When Chinese scholars promulgate foreign achievements, they also conduct in-depth research and development. For example, Huang Guowen and Chen Yang (2018) point out through case analysis that in the topic of ecolinguistics research, Arran Stubbe (2015) proposed boundaries of the three types of discourse (destructive discourse, ambivalent discourse, and beneficial discourse) with fuzzy borders that often overlap. Huan and Chen, therefore, suggest use of a continuum to distinguish and discuss discourse types instead. Similarly, He Wei and Wei Rong (2018c) point out that the scope of Western ecolinguistics research is unclear. Chinese scholars believe that although ecolinguistics has transdisciplinary attributes, the scope of research should be limited, and ecolinguistics should be a defined field and not be generalized. Zhou Wenjuan (2018) believes that the Western classical ecolinguistics presents significant features such as value neutrality and a weakening of ethics. She also points out that Confucian thought provides a natural foundation for Chinese ecolinguistics, and that Confucian ecological wisdom can help to enhance human ecological awareness.

3.3.4 Research on localization

Ecolinguistics presents a natural and significant need for localization wherever it is employed. Chinese ecolinguistics purposes to study the interaction between Chinese language and the Chinese ecological environment in its natural reality. If we accept the characterization of the second stage of the development of Chinese ecolinguistics, *Learning exploration stage* as *Following the West*, then the third stage, *Rapid development through Sino-Western dialogue stage*, could be rebranded as *In our own Words*. Both the Chinese language ecology research and the proposal of harmonious ecological discourse analysis based on Halliday's ecolinguistic thought but now have new descriptions and interpretations tailored to the Chinese context.

3.3.4.A. Linguistic diversity and ethnic minority languages

China is a multi-ethnic country which has always attached great importance to the investigation of and research into linguistic diversity, the vitality of minority languages and dialects, and language policies and planning. Endangered languages, especially of some minority languages, are another research focus of Chinese ecolinguistics. The endangered languages of ethnic minorities carry the culture of ethnic minorities in China and saving them is crucial to preserving Chinese culture, maintaining cultural diversity, and achieving language social as well as ecological balance. Non-governmental organizations, primarily within linguistic and cultural academia, are the main practitioners of endangered language protection. They acknowledge the status of language endangerment as they document and preserve endangered language data based on traditional knowledge-communication models. Ecolinguists can contribute to the creation of more diverse language products and offer effective language services targeted on language transmission, valuing, and preservation. In time, academics' efforts and appeals may attract the attention of the government and the general public to this important work such that they join in the maintenance and protection efforts. Scholars who have contributed to the research on the protection of minority languages from the perspective of ecolinguistics include Fan Junjun (2016a, 2016b, 2018), Nari Biligo (2021), Wang Jinjun and Huang Xingya (2020), Liu Jiwen and Liang Jingyu (2019), just to name a few.

In addition to language maintenance and preservation, the localization of Chinese ecolinguistics also involves the study of dialects, including the language attitudes of and toward dialect users and the ecological niche of dialects. These dialects are not necessarily endangered, but related research

can explain the cross-regional changes and integration of languages, and thus provide insight into the local political, economic, and cultural development of these dialect regions and speakers. Scholars in this field include Zou Xiaoyan (2020); Li Xianle, Liu Yifan, and Zhang Liwen (2020); and He Fangzhi (2017).

3.3.4.B. Harmonious Discourse Analysis in Chinese

Harmonious discourse analysis is the discourse analysis model proposed by Huang Guowen for the Chinese context. This is an example of a Chinese ecolinguistic scholar who has built a model based on deep understanding of the Chinese context, ideological roots, and theoretical support from traditional Chinese philosophy, and then has applied this to contemporary China's challenges.

Many schools of traditional Chinese philosophy contain rich ecological ethics, such as the yin/yang principle, agriculturalism, syncretism, and Mohism (which is most well-known for promoting love for all, in contrast to Confucianism's fidelity to family and connected individuals), but the most relevant to ecolinguistics are the Confucian and Taoist schools which focus heavily on the relationship between man and nature.

Among the various propositions of Confucianism and Taoism, ideas such as *the unity of heaven and man* and *Taoist nature* resonate strongly with the ecological linguistic community and have added nuances and perspectives to the field. *The unity of heaven and man* expresses the idea that man and nature are in harmony and identity. Chuang Tzu, a representative figure of Taoism writing in the late 4th century BC, is philosophy, *On the Equality of Things* saying, "Heaven and earth are born together with me, and all things are unique to me," indicating his awareness of the organic connection between man and nature. Traditional Chinese thought and wisdom are inextricably linked to ecology, and both Eastern and Western harmonious discourse analysis take this as an eco-philosophical view (c.f., Ecosophy, as introduced by Næss in the early 1970s and furthered by Guattari in the 1980s and 1990s, (LEVESQUE, 2016). Chinese scholars, who absorb these concepts from birth, are finally joining Western thinkers in applying ancient philosophy to modern linguistics and our natural world.

Harmonious discourse analysis in the Chinese context is not simply criticizing non-ecological factors but studying the adjustment and integration of ecological and non-ecological factors in combination with the Chinese national development plan, the social and cultural environments,

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and various elements in the natural environment. Ecolinguists need to study language and the various stories constructed by language, in order to reveal how these stories shape human life and various relationships in human life, and to resist stories that destroy the healthy development of ecology. Ecolinguistics offers a way to promote stories that are conducive to ecological harmony and sustainable development (e.g., ZHAO RUIHUA, CHEN YUMIN, 2021; PANG and MARLOW, 2021; SUN LI, YANG XIAOYU, 2020; LU JIAN and CHANG CHENGUANG, 2019; TAN XIAOCHUN, 2018). In this way Chinese ecolinguists answer Halliday's 1990 call for ecological action in a harmonious manner that follows traditional Chinese values and serves as a manifestation of the social responsibility and responsibility of linguists.

4. Contributions, Prospects, and Conclusions

Localization is not only a disciplinary worldview, but also a research methodology and a practical theory. Development of ecolinguistic localization is critical for the global development of the field. To situate ecolinguistics effectively to contribute to resolutions of our world's ecological crises, we must first focus on the language and ecological reality of different countries and regions. China is moving forward in this regard through attention to the application of ecological metaphor, harmonious discourse analysis, and language/dialect study and preservation. It is hoped that the example set by Chinese ecolinguistic scholars can inform the efforts of other international ecolinguistic scholars in areas where localization has not yet taken hold. For example, the proposal of harmonious discourse analysis may effectively support the diversified development of ecolinguistics as it complements the discourse of ecocriticism and provides more choices for scholars across the globe to discuss language and ecological issues.

While Chinese ecolinguistics is still in a relatively nascent stage of develop, it nonetheless has much to offer to the global conversation. For ecolinguistics to effect significant impact in human response to ecological crises, we must explore the linguistic and ecological reality of a wide variety of countries and regions. Because of the humanistic and cultural foundations of ecolinguistics, each region, country, and even culture must explore, revise, and develop their own ideas, theories, methods, and practices in accordance with their native languages and ecological conditions.

Ecolinguistics is based on dialog (COUTO, 2021), and China has joined the global conversation. As Stibbe (2018) said in an interview with Professor Huang Guowen, "Another exciting reason for the development of ecolinguistics in China is that traditional Chinese cultural constructs (such

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as Taoism, Zen and Confucianism) can be a source for finding new, credible, and actionable stories.” In traditional Chinese culture, Confucian classics, traditional poems –especially poems with landscape themes– ecological ethics abound, suggesting that people and nature can and should coexist in harmony (PANG, 2017). Confucianism attaches great importance to nature and to the relationship between man and nature as it also emphasizes the development of man in conjunction with the prosperity of nature and the protection of the ecological environment. Today’s world needs constant reminders that ecological balance still plays an important role. While Western ecolinguists posit connections with Eastern thought, these connections may be best explored by scholars who have inherited these philosophies with their culture.

The localization and vitalization of Chinese ecolinguistic research provides valuable insights for scholars and communities that are already fluent in ecolinguistic concepts and can serve as an example for scholars and communities that seek to develop their proficiency. Insights from Chinese scholars must be shared and used to enrich and expand the construction of ecolinguistics globally. Since ecolinguistics derives from a desire to explore practical applications of language study to protecting and promoting human linguistic and cultural diversity, we must faithfully attend to this core mission of the discipline. Overall and in whatever locale whether at home or abroad, ecolinguistic research mostly remains limited to academic contemplation and the theoretical research. However much we strive for relevant, practical, and applied research, global crises outpace our progress. We need to develop active partnerships with government, commerce, and industry. To provide value, Ecolinguistic research should intentionally expand its scope to applied practice, expanding and deepening the connotation from the application of social practice. For example, the COVID-19 pandemic of the past two years has changed the way people live, work, and learn with unexpected speed, depth, and breadth. In the face of the new global behaviors and new challenges faced in the post-epidemic era, language is playing a critical role in the restoration of social order and the reconstruction of the people's spiritual world. Ecolinguists need to explore localized methodologies for constructing new stories, finding effective discourse structures, and shedding light on the impact of language in conjunction with ecological challenges. We must relearn, reshape, and reimagine our relationship with the earth (PENG et al., 2021). Only in this fashion can we effect practical change in building a global human ecological community.

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We hope more scholars will pay attention to this world-changing field and will contribute to the practical and applied development of this discipline.

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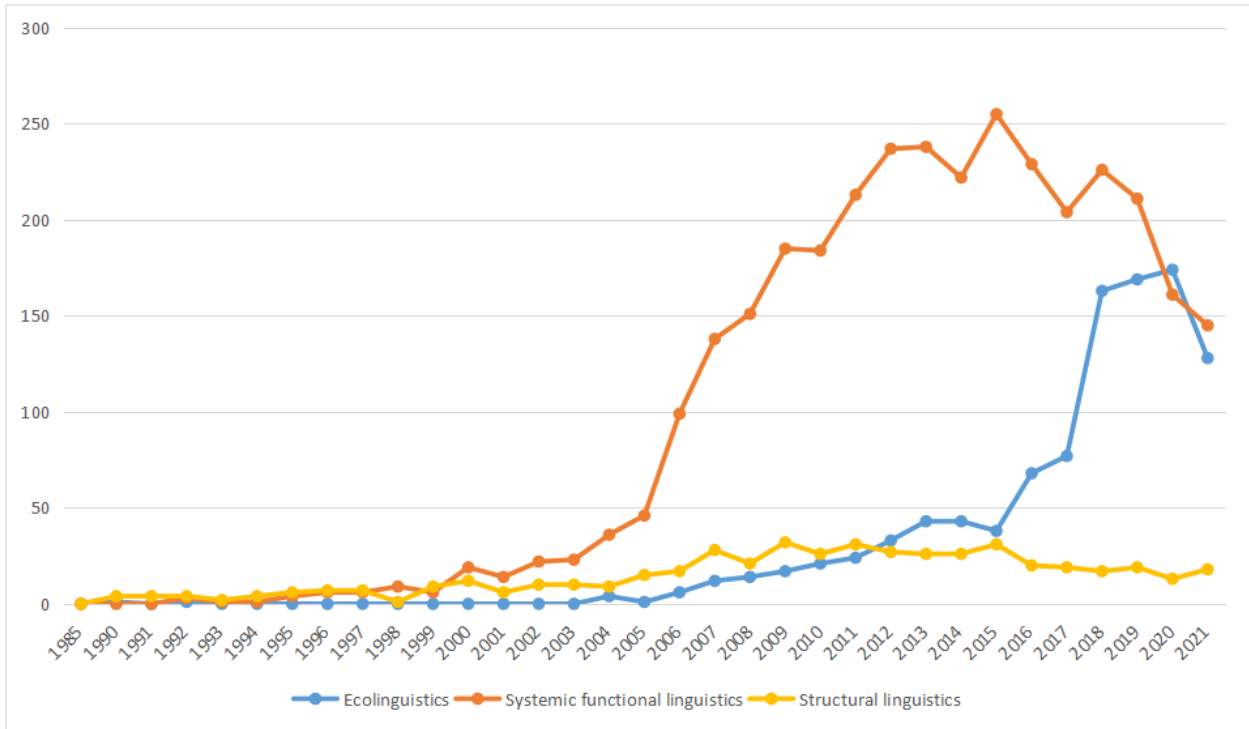
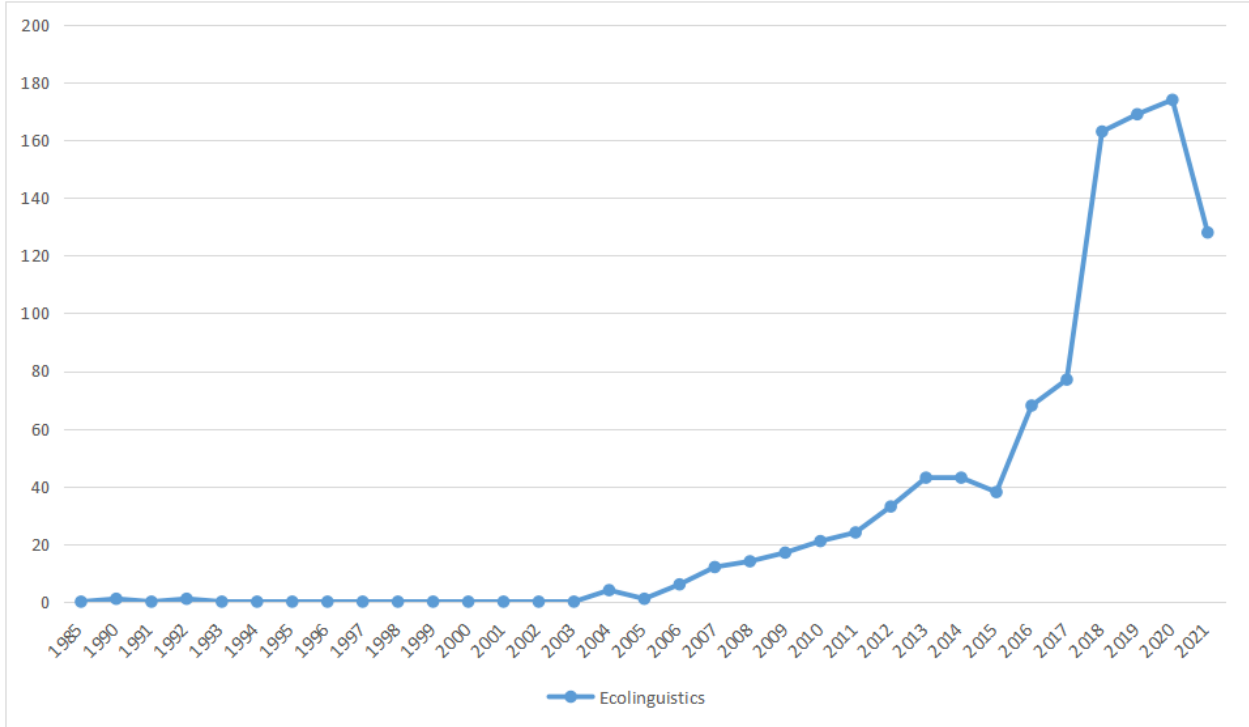
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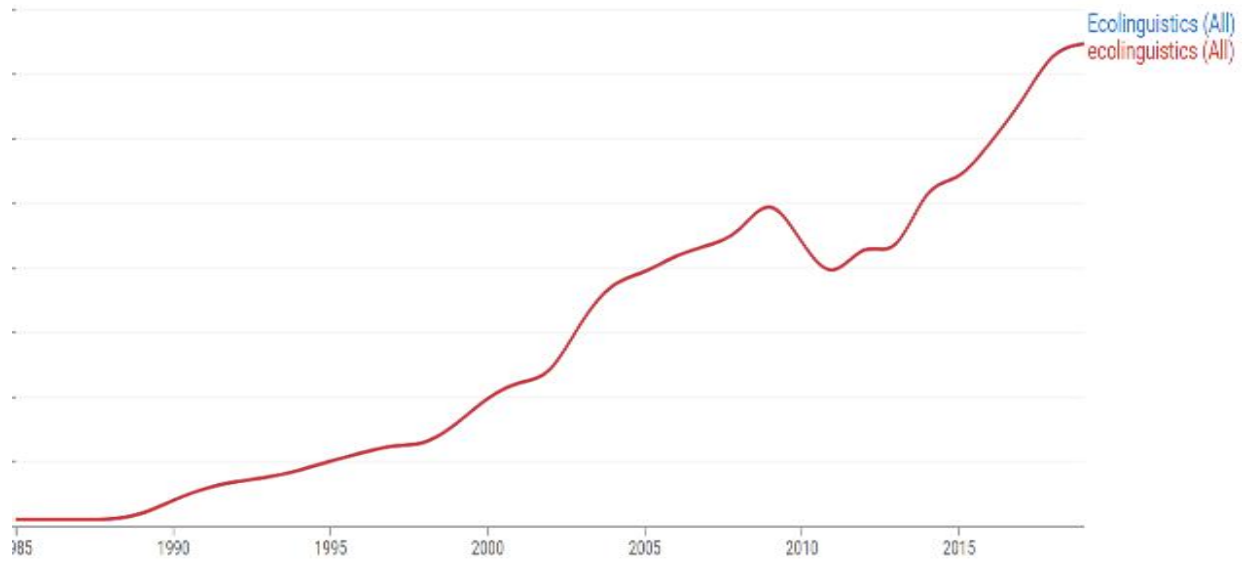


Figure 4: Global references to ecolinguistics over time
Ngram Viewer; 1985 - 2019

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