



IS ECOLINGUISTICS NECESSARY?

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Resumo: Este artigo indaga se os estudos ecolinguísticos, separados de uma linguística mais geral, afinal de contas são necessários *se* fizermos direito nossa linguística geral (diacrônica e sincrônica). A ênfase é sobre o *eco-* de ecolinguística de preferência a *necessário*. A ideia é de que o cerne filosófico da pesquisa ecolinguística está longe de ser novo, e existe e tem evoluído sobre alicerces perenes (históricos). O impulso metodológico e teórico da ecolinguística pode ser apresentado como uma extensão lógica de qualquer consideração detalhada de elementos de análise necessários a propósito do que pode ser considerado linguística geral tradicional e uma sociolinguística ampla. Argumenta-se que os detalhes da ecolinguística têm sido abordados em trabalhos linguísticos anteriores, pelo menos filosoficamente, e que os fundamentos da ecolinguística não são (necessariamente) novos na linguística, podendo ser um apelo recentemente desenvolvido para o que é matéria comum na ciência linguística. A questão é que se a ecolinguística é vinho (linguístico) velho recentemente guardado em garrafas novas (encaradas ecologicamente), o que os rótulos *ecolinguística* e *ecologia linguística* efetivamente oferecem como campos de pesquisa? Apesar de minha postura crítica, eu acredito que os estudos ecolinguísticos realmente têm uma grande contribuição a dar tanto à linguística quanto aos estudos ambientais.

Palavras-chave: Discurso; Estudos ambientais; Epistemologia; Ecologia da língua; Teoria linguística.

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Abstract: This paper considers whether studies separate from more general linguistic enquiry are necessary at all *if* we do our general (diachronic and synchronic) nobly. The emphasis is on the *eco-* of ecolinguistics rather than the *necessary*. The argument is that the philosophical core of ecolinguistic research is far from new and exists and advances on perennial (historical) linguistic bedrock. The methodological and theoretical thrust of ecolinguistics can be posed as a logical extension of any detailed consideration of elements of analysis necessitated under what can be considered traditional general linguistics and a parameter rich sociolinguistics. It is argued the details of ecolinguistics have been, at least philosophically, addressed in earlier linguistic work, and that the fundamentals of ecolinguistics ought not (necessarily) be new to linguistics and may merely be a recently developed appellative for what are recurrent concerns in linguistic science. The query is that if ecolinguistics is old (linguistic) wine freshly housed in new (ecologically focused) bottles, what do the monikers *ecolinguistics* and *linguistic ecology* as fields of research actually offer? Despite my critical position, I believe ecolinguistic studies do have a worthy contribution to make both to linguistics and to environmental studies research.

Key-words: Discourse; Environmental Studies; Epistemology; Language Ecology; Linguistic Theory

Introduction

In an expansion of a suite of ‘Is ... necessary?’ articles, I ask ‘Is *ecolinguistics* necessary?’. The position I take is intended to be leading and provocative. This contention is based in a continued questioning in and of the epistemology of language and environment research. I deliberate on whether ecolinguistic studies, separate from more general linguistic enquiry, are necessary at all *if* we do our general diachronic and synchronic linguistics nobly. The focus is on the *eco-* of ‘is *ecolinguistics* necessary?’ rather than the *necessary* of my question.

For several decades a large corpus of research has developed labelled ecolinguistics which studies the ecology of language and the language of ecology. My argument is that the philosophical core of ecolinguistic research is far from new and exists and advances on perennial historical linguistic bedrock. I believe the methodological and theoretical thrust of ecolinguistics can be posed as a logical extension of any detailed consideration of elements of analysis necessitated in a

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combination of the disciplines of traditional general linguistics and a parameter-rich sociolinguistics. I argue the details of ecolinguistics have been, at least philosophically, addressed in earlier treatments of linguistics, and that the fundamentals of ecolinguistics ought not necessarily new to linguistics. I claim the term ecolinguistics exists as a recently developed appellative for what are recurrent concerns in linguistic science.

My polemic is a reflection for linguists already working on ecolinguistic studies and is a preliminary yet not cursory or trivial deliberation for environmental studies scholars for whom studies in ecolinguistics remain new and relatively unexplored.

I query that if ecolinguistics is old linguistic wine freshly housed in new ecologically focused bottles, what do the monikers *ecolinguistics* and *linguistic ecology* as fields of research actually offer? Despite my critical position, I do believe ecolinguistic studies have a worthy contribution to make both to linguistics and to environmental studies research. I outline these positives in what available space I have.

1. Necessity

Language and ecology are obliged to each other. Language demands an environment, a topos; human environments are languaged. Human and natural spatial relationships are at the centre of an active nexus of interaction between language in environment and linguistics with ecology. Ecolinguistics, language and environment, linguistic ecology, and language ecology are sub-disciplines of modern applied linguistics. The fields attempt to reconcile the role of languages in interaction, research how languages develop, change, and die, and analyse the language of environmental discourse and environmentalism. Language scrutinised from an ecolinguistic perspective elucidates how lexica, grammars, cultural priorities, power, and politics operate within physical yet human-directed abstract environments-cum-landscapes.

Ecolinguistics is by no means the only language based field of enquiry with connection to ecology and the environment. Among other disciplines, onomastics has a long and lively tradition of studying language in the environment, and in recent decades there has been a significant interest in the relationship between language and large-scale space from lexical, grammatical, and pragmatic perspectives. Tellingly, geographical information system research has become an increasingly important tool for a range of linguistic sub-fields, as have many anthropological approaches to language and the world relations.

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Ecolinguistics most commonly takes its point of departure as linguistics rather than *eco-*, environment, or environmental studies. This is significant. Most scholars who would label themselves ecolinguists take their epistemological roots in linguistics or discourse studies as opposed to approaching the field from the many possibilities of ecologically related enterprise. The question of a division of labour between the *eco-* and the *-linguistics* of ecolinguistics is thus unclear.

Despite the title to Mühlhäusler's (2003) *Language of Environment, Environment of Language* which appears to qualify this quandary, the *environment of language* element in this work is still largely linguistically driven as opposed to being of an environmental bent. I suspect the linguist may disagree with me here.

The basis of a large amount of ecolinguistic work which focuses on the nature of multilingual linguistic ecologies is formal synchronic and diachronic linguistics and to a lesser extent discourse analysis, topics not new to linguistics or science in general by the time ecolinguistics came of age in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. What ecolinguistics does offer is a 'parameter rich, potentially conclusion poor' position. This is an outcome based in the purported conceptual foundations of ecolinguistics.

So what are these foundations? The study of language change, for example, philology; the study of language and linguistic levels as a system – for example, morphology, syntax, and phonology; the study of language in its social context, for example, sociolinguistics; the study of language and place – for example, onomastics and certain areas of geography and anthropological linguistics; language and thought – for example, Whorfian linguistics; and the study of discourse – for example analysis of print media.

A decontextualised linguistics with little concern for broader contextual factors is not disallowed in such wider reaching linguistic considerations. On the contrary, where such formal approaches are limited and are stretched in their ability to describe, understand, and mimic language as a reified entity, the opening to ecological concerns seems almost a *fait accompli*.

My position is that doing any type of linguistics of any notable complexity, which exceeds the stringencies of analyses of language form, must by definition venture into the realm of ecology. Here these ecological concerns match several or many of the concerns of ecolinguistics, and most likely, some concerns of environmental studies

As such, I do not believe ecolinguistics offers or necessarily is anything conceptually new. What

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do *ecolinguistics* and *the ecology of language* add then to the very field in which they find themselves?

As the large corpus of ecolinguistic work demonstrates, the contribution of ecolinguistics to linguistics has been significant. Still, ecolinguistics is far from having no critics. A methodological and theoretical offering relating culture, that is language, and physical environment, that is ecology, place-space, names, time, and linguistics, is definitely alluring. Still, by creating a separate sub-field, are we complicating an already complex field of linguistic analysis or are we broadening our linguistic analysis to incorporate environmental studies? And what then does applying the prefix *eco-* and modifier *ecological* to linguistics achieve in and for general linguistics?

2. Emphasising the *eco-* in *ecolinguistics*

Much of what most European ecolinguists research could be conveniently labelled *discourse analysis* or *critical discourse analysis*. Their concern is predominantly with how various media report on environmental matters like climate change, pollution, and environmental catastrophes. Such analyses could well be conducted by, under, and using other versions of discourse analysis, e.g. Pêcheux's strand of discourse analysis and Fairclough's critical discourse analysis. These approaches analyse power relations and ideological standpoints available to media outlets—internet, print, film, even music—to emphasise most commonly the same strong point reasoned in earlier ecolinguistic work.

The back cover to Harré et al. (1999) summarises the majority of modern (ecolinguistic) discourse analysis:

Ultimately, [this book] is a call to action, as the authors see in the increasing “greening” of English and other Western languages a kind of linguistic way of replacing or postponing action with talk alone.

This same perspective was put forward in a now proto-ecolinguistic article in 1983 ‘Talking about environmental issues’ wherein Mühlhäusler argued talk is cheap. Language is an excellent tool to use to achieve this economy.

There are, of course, several European and non-European ecolinguistic authors who have engaged

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in topics beyond discourse analysis. Trampe, Fill, Finke, Bang, Døør, and Do Couto have all elucidated perspectives which emphasise life, a defence of nature, and a struggle against every kind of suffering, which can be observed and meditated through the medium of language. These concerns are applied to all beings—animals, inanimate beings, cultural and natural landscapes. Much of this work draws heavily on Western environmental thought like Arne Næss's Deep Ecology, Aldo Leopold's Land Ethic, and other pertinent perspectives in cultural geography and environmental studies. In such stances, ideology and power relations and differentials play a secondary role to an actual understanding and realisation of language phenomena holistically.

In a similar fashion to ecologists, whose main focus is interaction between and across organisms and environments, ecolinguistics and the linguistic ecology strand of ecolinguistics focuses on the interactions between people and environment, between any two individuals, and involving languages. Like botanic, biological, and population ecology, the initial concern of ecolinguistics is with the population of organisms, namely people, their territories or environments, and their ways of communication and expression of thoughts and culture.

Ecology seen from a natural scientific perspective should necessarily consider language just as a linguistic science perspective must eventually entail a sophisticated involvement with speakers' ecologies and environments. Language study is a ground zero requirement for a developed examination of ecology. Studying ecology is a ground zero requisite for linguistic analysis.

According to Do Couto's *ecosystemic linguistics*, everything linguistic arises out of the fundamental fact that language is not only metaphorically rooted in an ecology, but is a fundamental entity of ecological scrutiny. Similarly, I appraise my cooperation with Peter Mühlhäusler on the language of Norfolk Island as an ecolinguistic case in point which argues for the existence and embeddedness of language within time, topos, memory, and ideologies.

Not only do language and environment coexist on Norfolk Island within a frame of terrestriality and linguistic action, the nexus created by linguistic nodes and ecological niches, for example, the placement of physical business and road signs in the literal and often littoral landscape, enables a unified point of view from which research can approach any language phenomena as being ecologically bound and driven.

This position does not imply in and of itself a theory of 'everything linguistic'; it simply implicates possibilities. And inferring the potential of and for a parameter rich, conceivably conclusion poor linguistics, perspectives advocated by Mühlhäusler and Nash's Norfolk Island engagement and

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Bang, Døør, Steffensen, and Nash's (2007) *Language, Ecology and Society*, helps us arrive at a questioning of the very basis of the linguistically focused discipline within which I and others have worked. If ecolinguistics must be ecological, and if ecology must be linguistic, what are the need for the monikers *ecological linguistics* and *linguistic ecology*?

While a lot of what ecolinguistics has traditionally focused on is peripheral to that which general linguistics is concerned, if general linguists are good linguists and consider some aspects of ecology in their analyses, they should also by default be doing at least reasonable ecolinguistics.

3. Does ecolinguistics need to exist?

General linguistics is concerned with defining what language is. Most models within such a rubric reify language and depart from the idea and reality of the function and actual operation of language. If ecolinguistics attempts to consider language phenomena holistically, the result should be a unified point of view from which researchers can approach any language phenomena.

Returning to my question 'Is ecolinguistics necessary?' my answer is both yes and no. Linguistics needs to take an ecological perspective and vice versa, but ecolinguistics do not exist alone from any other detailed general linguistic or discourse analysis account of language and environment.

Ecolinguistics does implicate the relation between the physical environment as well as more abstract language and world relationships. That ecolinguistics is still firmly grounded primarily in linguistics should not only be a concern for ecolinguistics researchers working within languaged domains like discourse analysis and onomastics; the environmental relevance of ecolinguistics should also be a matter of research commitment for linguists.

As a student of ecolinguistics, in this paper I may have appeared to be pulling out the carpet from underneath my very own feet, and simultaneously jeopardising my own scientific bread and butter. On the contrary, I believe I have applied myself to what has been a somewhat neglected concern within linguistics, environmental studies, and the ethnography of placenaming – a detailed questioning of the philosophical basis for the placement and application of ecolinguistics within general linguistics.

My entrance more than 15 years ago into linguistics and ecolinguistics was because of my background in environmental studies. Perhaps the questioning nature of this piece is based in this background and indeed a self-questioning of the accuracy, distinctiveness, and relevance of my own writing in ecolinguistics. As I approach my 40th birthday, I remain sceptical of the worth of

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what my work as an ecolinguist has contributed to the broader linguistic canon. I hope it is upon a foundation of self-questioning and awareness that more mindful studies in and of ecolinguistics will proceed.

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