

What is Ecolinguistics?

Rajendra Kumar Dash, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D.

Associate Professor in English
Dept. of Basic Sciences & Humanities
GMR Institute of Technology, Rajam
Andhra Pradesh 532127
dash.rk@gmr.it

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Introduction

The term 'Ecolinguistics' is auto-suggestive, insofar as it indicates the combination of 'ecology' and 'linguistics'. Thus, apparently though, Ecolinguistics is a branch of linguistics dealing with ecology. However, it's no definition; or at least, it leaves a lot unsaid. Yet when we search the most popular dictionaries for a definition, the Oxford, Cambridge, Merriam-Webster, Chambers, and the American Heritage Dictionary of English Language, etc. disappoint us. Then, the question arises: Is 'Ecolinguistics' a neologism? Especially when words describing the other branches of linguistics, such as 'applied linguistics', 'sociolinguistics', 'psycholinguistics', 'computational linguistics', 'neurolinguistics', have featured in popular lexicons, the conspicuous absence of 'ecolinguistics' arguably points toward its lack of popularity as a branch of study. In fact, studies reveal Ecolinguistics is an emerging field of study since the 1990's (LeVasseur, 2014; Stibbe, 2015; Chen, 2016; Wenjuan, 2017; Fill, 2018) it is being treated as branch of linguistics in its own right. In the subsequent sections, we shall discuss the meaning, nature and scope of Ecolinguistics with a focus on its evolution, growth, and future dimensions.

Ecolinguistics: What Is in a Name?

There is little doubt that the 'eco' in Ecolinguistics lends substance to the concept even as 'eco' stands for ecology or ecological and 'linguistics' means the scientific study of language. The interface between ecology and language is prima facie the concern of Ecolinguistics. An uninformed reader, however, may be lost in the thought whether Ecolinguistics is the ecological study of language or a linguistic study of ecology --- or both. Words and phrases that churn out of such an exercise may well facilitate a good understanding of Ecolinguistics: Ecology, the ecology of language, language ecology, ecosophy, and several other terms derived from the mutations or combinations or in association with 'ecology' and 'language' (i.e., ecocide, linguicide, biodiversity, linguistic diversity and a host of others).

German biologist Ernst Haeckel defined the term 'ecology' long back in 1866 as "the study of the interrelations between organism and their living and non-living surroundings -- including organisms of the same and of other species". This study facilitated an ecological approach to life and

things, and in the process helped the concept of Ecolinguistics to take strong roots. Within a century, say in the 1960's, its adjective, i.e., 'ecological', was understood as "biological, natural, environmentally friendly". Contemporary understanding of 'ecology' which is presented as follows is completely in sync with the assumptions of Ecolinguistics:

Ecology is the study of the relationships between living organisms, including humans, and their physical environment; it seeks to understand the vital connections between plants and animals and the world around them. Ecology also provides information about the benefits of ecosystems and how we can use Earth's resources in ways that leave the environment healthy for future generations. (www.esa.org)

It was Einar Haugen who in 1972 brought about the symbiosis between ecology and language while highlighting the need for ecological study of language and linguistic study of ecology. Haugen put his views on the environment of languages:

"The true environment of a language is the society that uses it as one of its codes. Language exists only in the minds of its users, and it only functions in relating these users to one another and to nature, i.e., their social and natural environment. Part of its ecology is therefore psychological: its interaction with other languages in the minds of bi- and multilingual speakers. Another part of its ecology is sociological: its interaction with the society in which it functions as a medium of communication. The ecology of a language is determined primarily by the people who learn it, use it, and transmit to others. (1971/2001)

Einar Haugen's ecological perspectives necessitated the study of language in its ecology. Haugen's new ecological direction in linguistics -- language ecology -- paved the way for the birth of Ecolinguistics in the 1990s.

The famous linguist Michael Halliday's keynote paper "New Ways of Meaning: the Challenge to Applied Linguistics," which was delivered at the 9th World Conference of Applied Linguistics in 1990 is considered to be a critical turn for Ecolinguistics. In this paper, Halliday famously claimed that "classism, growthism, destruction of species, pollution and the like [...] are not just problems for the biologists and physicists. They are problems for the applied linguistic community as well" (Halliday, 2001: 199). In this way Michael Halliday had opened up the channel for linguistics to care about the environment in which language occurred. Halliday contributed to the emergence of Ecolinguistics by raising a few questions: 'Do linguistic patterns, literally, affect the survival and wellbeing of the human species as well as other species on Earth?' (Cited in Stibbe, 2015:8). It may be noted here that Ecological psychology emerged in the 1960s and 1970s, but Ecological linguistics/linguistic ecology emerged in the 1990s.

In the 21st century, characterized by consumer society and (post)globalization, ecology must determine the world view and ecological perspective has become indispensable in view of increasing threat of extinction to ecosystems, the planet Earth, and languages. Ecolinguistics explores the

harmony (and the lack of harmony as well) between humans, nature, language, and culture leading to sustainable, i.e., mutually rewarding growth, thereby celebrating linguistic diversity, biodiversity, and cultural diversity. As such Ecolinguistics studies language ecology, analyzes texts which are about environmental or ecological issues, and offer frameworks to study discourses which hold the potential to impact “systems that support life” (Wu, 2018). Ecolinguistics has successfully tried to fulfil the need of a linguistics that can protect ecology through language and language through ecological sustainability by harnessing, developing, and promoting both language and ecology.

Arran Stibbe, one of the greatest pioneers and shapers of Ecolinguistics, shows the inalienability of ecology and language in Ecolinguistics:

“The term ‘ecolinguistics’ has been used to describe studies of language interaction and diversity, studies of texts such as signposts which are outdoors; analysis of texts which happen to be about the environment; studies of how words in a language relate to objects in the local environment; studies of the mix of languages surrounding pupils in multicultural schools; studies of dialects in particular geographical locations, and many other diverse areas. The multiplicity of approaches arises from different understandings of the concept of ‘ecology’, from a very broad concept of ‘the interaction of some things with other things’ to narrow concepts such as ‘related to environmentalism’ (2015: 8).

The above quote implies how Ecolinguistics cannot do justice to itself without fostering ecological perspectives and ensuring environmental sustainability.

Linguistics in general provides tools, techniques, and methods to study texts, contexts, events or phenomena from a specific approach or perspective. Like any other linguistics, Ecolinguistics studies language, but it does so according to the environment the language is used in (Derni, 2008). This relatively new branch of linguistics, states Fill (1993) “investigates the role of language in the development and possible solution of ecological and environmental problems”. There is no doubt that Ecolinguistics links the study of language with ecology. Ecolinguistics analyses environmental discourse from a critical point of view (Fill, 1993). Ecolinguistics sees the destruction of biodiversity as loss to language and culture. Similarly, language loss and language death are more or less ecological problems. Both ecocide and linguicide are concerns of Ecolinguistics, which wants ecosystems, languages, cultures, and all the species to survive and grow. It can be said without contradiction that Ecolinguistics pitches in favour of biodiversity, linguistic and cultural diversity, and critiques texts/narratives/discourses that harm or can harm language, culture, and Planet Earth.

Ecolinguistics assumes that language --- the choice of vocabulary and the way ideas are presented ---- does or can affect the environment: it can lead to desertification of forests or afforestation of deserts, killing or saving of animals, birds, species, etc. Ecolinguistics strongly believes that people’s approach to languages, culture, and environment is formed by the stories they live by and language helps to tell and retell these stories and impact the beliefs. It investigates the role of language in the development and possible solution of ecological and environmental problems. Ecolinguists

favours positive discourse analysis and criticizes language that is harmful for ecology. It demolishes unecological language uses which promote anthropocentrism, granting humans the legitimacy to destroy or dominate other species. Ecolinguistics supports sustainability efforts and denounces moves that lead to climate change, endangerment of languages, disappearance of species and cultures, and death of ecosystems.

The International Ecolinguistics Association, which has 7000 plus ecolinguists as its members and is founded by Prof. Dr Arran Stibbe, one of the fathers of Ecolinguistics, states:

“Ecolinguistics explores the role of language in the life-sustaining interactions of humans, other species and the physical environment. The first aim is to develop linguistic theories which see humans not only as part of society, but also as part of the larger ecosystems that life depends on. The second aim is to show how linguistics can be used to address key ecological issues, from climate change and biodiversity loss to environmental justice.” (www.ecolinguistics-association.org.)

It can be said that Ecolinguistics studies the link between language and ecology and fosters the growth of ecology and language.

Ecolinguistic Discourse Analysis

Ecolinguistics is an applied linguistics that studies discourses that are either favourable or unfavourable for the sustenance of the Earth. It denounces linguistic practices that create harmful effects on the ecology or habitat. Meant to study the ecological role languages play, Ecolinguistics develops theories that explore the interrelationship between language and ecology involving humans. It involves study of a range of issues such as climate change, conservation or destruction of ecosystems, new practices at curbing language death, cultural or environmental degradation, and celebrating the symbiotic relationship between ecology and all the stakeholders and factors influencing sustainability positively. Ecolinguistics provides the necessary tools to study the life-enhancing role of language through ecology.

“Ecolinguistic discourse analysis,” states Wu (2015), “consists of analyzing discourses and judging them within a normative framework that considers both humans and the embedding of humans within a larger community of life.” Stibbe (2014) is of the opinion that:

While ecolinguistics tends to use the same forms of linguistic analysis as traditional critical discourse studies, the normative framework it operates in considers relationships of humans not just with other humans but also with the larger ecological systems that all life depends on. Ecolinguistics analyses discourses from consumerism to nature poetry, critiquing those which encourage ecologically destructive behaviour and seeking out those which encourage relationships of respect and care for the natural world. The expanded context of ecolinguistics complicates power relations between oppressor and oppressed since it considers impacts on non-human subjects and

future generations not yet born, necessitating both theoretical development of CDS and an application of an ecologically based normative framework for judging discourses against.

Ecolinguistics, however, is a sort of critical discourse analysis with ever revolving new frameworks to critique or interpret texts/discourses. I agree with Chen (2016) that ecolinguistics adopts “ecosophy”, a philosophy of ecological harmony or equilibrium, as its “principle normative framework”.

Conclusion

Ecolinguistics is an ever-emerging branch of study. When ecolinguistic practices are found to have enhanced the quality of living, this new branch of linguistics has fulfilled the long-felt need for a discipline that can study the pivotal role of linguistics to affect or safeguard the ecology and ensure environmental justice.

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