Editorial

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Language and ecology in social imaginaries: ecolinguistic perspectives

1 Rationale for the special issue

Ecolinguistics, an emerging interdisciplinary field at the intersection of language and ecology, explores the intricate connections between linguistic practices and ecological systems (Penz and Fill 2022; Stibbe 2020). Aligned with the aims and scope of the *Journal of World Languages*, this special issue is mainly devoted to the Hallidayan tradition within ecolinguistics. Different from the theme of other special issues on ecolinguistics (e.g. Chau and Jacobs 2022; Fill and Steffensen 2014; Ponton and Sokół 2022), this special issue mainly focuses on the profound influence of language on our perceptions of nature and modern societies. It brings together diverse contributions that examine how language shapes and is shaped by societal imaginaries. The contributions in this special issue draw functional-oriented linguistic theories and discourse analysis approaches often adopted within the interdisciplinary field of ecolinguistics, such as systemic functional linguistics (e.g. transitivity system, appraisal framework), cognitive linguistics (e.g. conceptual metaphor theory, conceptual blending theory), multimodal discourse analysis (MDA), positive discourse analysis (PDA), and critical discourse analysis (CDA). The data analyzed in this special issue encompass a wide variety of discourse genres in different national contexts including advertising discourse, tourism discourse, political discourse, online discourse, digital discourse, news reports, and language textbooks.

Ecolinguistics has been seen as a development of Critical Discourse Studies (CDS) (e.g. Stibbe 2014; Zhou 2022). In this perspective, it forms part of a long-standing European/Anglo tradition that advances societal critique through an analysis of the role of language in determining power imbalances and harmful social practices. In general, critical ecolinguistic studies explore how language shapes and reflects our relationships with the natural world; and how the

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dominant narratives of industrial consumer capitalism have led the world to the brink of ecological catastrophe. They investigate linguistic patterns, discourses, and narratives that influence societal attitudes towards ecological issues, and how these determine collective and individual behaviour. Central themes within such studies include linguistic representations of nature, environmental discourse in media and literature, the critique of language use in environmental policymaking. By analyzing such themes, ecolinguists uncover hidden ideologies and power dynamics that underpin environmental debates and decisions. Ecolinguistics in this sense is a critical paradigm, that challenges dominant narratives supporting what Greta Thunberg (2019) calls the "fairy tale" of endless economic growth, and the exploitation of natural resources over sustainability and ecological integrity. It critiques language use that perpetuates anthropocentrism and promotes unsustainable practices, advocating instead for discourses that foster environmental stewardship and respect for biodiversity.

Recent trends have seen attempts to situate ecolinguistic research in a less overtly critical dimension, that of so-called "positive discourse analysis" (Bartlett 2012; Martin 2004; Stibbe 2017). Such studies might engage in holistic discourse analysis by considering the interconnectedness of language, culture, and ecology. They may highlight the importance of language diversity and indigenous knowledge systems in shaping sustainable relationships with the environment. By promoting more inclusive and culturally sensitive discourse, such ecolinguistic studies contribute to a more nuanced understanding of environmental issues and support efforts towards positive ecological transformation.

Whether understood in a "positive" or "critical" sense, ecolinguistics is vital, in this historical period, because it illuminates how language constructs our understanding of the environment and influences our behaviour towards it. The narratives we create about nature through language not only reflect societal values and beliefs but also play a crucial role in shaping the social worlds we inhabit. By critically examining language use in different social contexts, ecolinguists reveal underlying ideologies that either support or challenge (un-)sustainable ecological practices.

In their different ways, our contributors investigate the concept of "social imaginaries", which encompasses shared beliefs, symbols, and narratives that societies use to interpret their social and natural environments. Such imaginaries are instrumental in shaping public perceptions and attitudes towards ecological issues. Finally, by analyzing linguistic representations in social discourse, our contributors uncover how language frames debates about environmental stewardship and sustainability.

2 Contributions of the special issue

In addition to this introduction, the special issue consists of eight research articles. In "Taste the feeling: an ecolinguistic analysis of Coca-Cola advertising", Arran Stibbe explores corporate discourse via the TV advertisements of Coca-Cola, whose impact on public health and the environment have often been questioned. Stibbe uses MDA to explore generic variations across the corpus and identifies five specific types of advertisement, called "classic-type, identity-type, narrative-type, cause-type, and counter-type". The study presents a historical recap of the development of Coke's advertisements, and thus shows how the persuasive discourse of this multinational adapted over time to suit the increasing sophistication of its consumers. Regrettably, Stibbe comments that the study could have referred to "thousands of other advertisers and their products". The article concludes with a more positive focus, as Stibbe discusses possible beneficial messages that could be spread by environmental agents using the advertisements' persuasive techniques.

Douglas Ponton's article, "Tourism and natural imaginary in Sicily: an ecolinguistic perspective", focuses on the role of "the imaginary" as a heuristic device. It explores Sicilian tourism through an ecolinguistic lens, concentrating on the notion of ecological sustainability as found in tourism promotion in blogs and other web-based media. Analysis shows that such advertisements often conform to generic, commercially-driven criteria instead of fostering a genuine sense of place or faithfully representing local ecosystems. A predictable, genre-determined "imaginary" of the place emerges, in which birds, plants, trees, creatures and even human beings hardly appear. This elision of biodiversity risks homogenizing destinations, and may undermine ecological sensitivity and sustainable tourism practices.

In "Latin American ecolinguistics: deconstructing discourse studies, coloniality and industrial environmentalism", Diego Forte presents an overview of the progress of some of the themes outlined above in the South American context, where nature and the environment have become, in his words "a subtopic in social struggle issues; a new context for social conflict". Crucially, Forte notes that, although ecolinguistics is apparently thriving in South America, there is as yet little theoretical or methodological creativity on display, that the field is rather marked by "coloniality". Given the key role of Latin America in the ongoing climate crisis, Forte argues for the importance of local knowledge and perspectives on the issues, instead of the current pattern, the adoption of dominant discourses from nations of the global north.

Lorenzo Buonvivere's article is "Positive discourse analysis of Aotearoa New Zealand Foreign Minister's speeches: an ecolinguistic perspective". It describes a framework known as Indigenous or Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK), which encourages a more beneficial relationship with nature. The study shows how one

prominent political figure, the former New Zealand Minister of Foreign Affairs, Nanaia Mahuta, brought traditional Maori concepts into national debate on ecological themes, thereby simultaneously opposing mainstream neo-liberal discourses and empowering local identities and ancient patterns of knowledge. The article covers lexical choices, metaphors and discourse frames in Mahuta's speeches, highlighting intertextual overlapping with Maori proverbs and linguistic features in a cultural polyphony that highlights traditional "ways of being or identities". A key concept emerges, that of *kaitiakitanga*, which refers to "stewardship and care", traditional ways of relating to the environment which have a global relevance.

Jacqueline Aiello and Emilia Di Martino, in "Communicating intergenerational justice and climate change: a study of youth-generated environmental discourses", focus on the key issues of how ecosophical attitudes and practices resonate among younger generations, the mechanisms of memetic contagion and persuasion in online contexts. The aim is to show how, in the context of the discourse of Generation Climate Europe (GCE) – a European coallition of youth climate groups – sustainable climate advocacy is being advanced by youth across digital platforms. The article focuses on a corpus of podcasts and newsletters produced by GCE, and the transmission of ideas that "challenge and critique government agencies currently addressing the climate catastrophe". The accent here is on positive discourse analysis, on discourse that adopts a social progress frame, for example, emphasising the contribution made by the environment to our quality of life.

In "A cognitive analysis of animal imagery in digital discourse: a case study of bengali tweets", Monalisa Bhattacherjee and Sweta Sinha present a study of online discourse that probes contemporary linguistic patterns involved in representing the natural world. The authors use conceptual metaphor theory and conceptual blending theory to explore the data, and incorporate cultural knowledge to emphasise that harming or exploiting animals, accepted practices in modern societies, go against ancient cultural and religious precepts. What emerges are patterns of online speech that construe speciesism, a "kind of metaphoricity that creates false frames in the minds of humans that downgrades the characteristics of certain animals in a community". As one might expect, the authors also find that the category of "hate speech" applied to certain types of discourse, is typically used only when the social actors attacked are humans.

Jianxin Zhang and Lulu Cheng present a case study in their article, "Ambivalent or beneficial? An ecological discourse analysis of news reports on the adventures of China's wandering elephants". They use the Appraisal framework to assess public reactions to news stories concerning the movements of China's wild elephants. In a European context a parallel may be found in the case of re-wilding discourses, where the presence of large predators such as bears or wolves may attract positive evaluations from environmentalists but mixed responses from a wary general public.

Among the authors' aims is that of indicating positive discursive strategies for outlining China's concept of ecological civilization, an aim that presupposes, as in the last article, the presence of traditional knowledge and a sub-stratum of ecological care that characterises human relations with nature. Interestingly, some of the negative Affect responses reported signal concern for the animals' welfare and not simply preoccupation with the danger they may pose to humans. In general, the evaluative language used justifies the authors' claim that more beneficial discourses prevail over destructive ones.

Jingxue Ma deals with "Promoting the formation of environmental awareness in children: the representation of nature in Chinese language textbooks", and poses a vital question: "How can language education potentially facilitate the fostering of children's environmental awareness?". The study is squarely based on the ecolinguistic "beneficial stories" approach of Stibbe (2020). It also refers to a current Chinese conceptualisation of ecosophy "Diversity and Interaction, Coexistence and Harmony" (He and Liu 2020; He and Wei 2018), a notion that blends Confucianism, Daoism, and Mohism with modern Chinese diplomatic ideas. Based on Halliday's transitivity system, the article shows how animals and plants may be endowed with "inherent agency and self-motivation", or else represented in a subservient role. Happily, the author finds that most stories regarding nature are beneficial, and high levels of personification, individualising and foregrounding that concern animals and plants. In Chinese primary textbooks, the author notes that animals are "mainly portrayed as independent beings with free will, and in some cases, they are portrayed as equals to human beings". It would be important to carry out some comparative studies to see how far Western equivalents shape up against this positive finding.

3 Conclusions

Appropriately, this special issue includes contributions from many and diverse parts of the world. Some articles have a relevance to globally occurring discourse, some are based in a local context but illustrate trends that may have a global reach. Ecolinguistics is currently at a pivotal juncture, where its role in addressing pressing ecological issues is increasingly recognized. The future of ecolinguistic research promises to delve deeper into the intricate relationships among language, society, and the environment, offering innovative, crossdisciplinary, multidisciplinary, and transdisciplinary insights and practical solutions to global ecological challenges.

One significant future direction in ecolinguistics, highlighted by some of our contributors, is the exploration of indigenous and local knowledge systems. These often embody sustainable practices and worldviews that can inform and transform

contemporary ecological discourses. Ecolinguists will continue to study how these knowledge systems are communicated and preserved through language, and how they can be integrated into broader environmental policies and practices. Another promising direction is the analysis of environmental narratives in media and politics. Understanding how language shapes public perception of ecological issues is crucial for fostering effective environmental communication and advocacy. Future research will likely focus on inspecting the rhetorical strategies used in environmental discourse and their impact on public engagement and policy-making. Furthermore, ecolinguistics will increasingly intersect with fields such as ecopsychology and environmental education, examining how language influences ecological identity and behavior. This interdisciplinary approach can lead to the development of educational frameworks that promote ecological awareness and sustainable living.

Ecolinguistics is a fertile terrain for scholarly enquiry, that probes the intimate connections between language and ecology, and these studies help to consolidate achievements in the emerging tradition. By highlighting diverse perspectives and methodologies, this special issue aims to further advance the field, fostering a deeper understanding of how language can contribute to a sustainable future. Thanks to all our contributors for their pioneering work.

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