



<https://doi.org/10.22363/2687-0088-43172>


EDN: MTRPIG

Introductory article / Вступительная статья

Ecolinguistics: Consolidating a research paradigm

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Abstract

As the ecological crisis facing our planet deepens, understanding the role of language in shaping perceptions and behaviour in relation to the environment becomes ever more critical. This special issue focuses on ecolinguistics, an interdisciplinary domain of linguistics that explores issues of ecological significance through the lens of language and its functioning. Although the field has a rather eclectic history with researchers invoking the term *ecolinguistics* in diverse spaces from language contact and language acquisition to language policy and bi/multilingualism, it now seems quite clear that contemporary ecolinguistics is most reflective of and aligned with a discourse analytic approach that examines language use in a variety of contexts with aims to either critique language use that perpetuates ecological degradation or elevate alternative language practices that contribute to wellbeing and sustainability. This introductory article overviews recent developments in the field and outlines the main directions of ecolinguistic studies, specifying the range of its methods and approaches. It then introduces the exemplary collection of articles in this special issue and highlights their contribution to ecolinguistics research. The challenges we face are global in nature, and the dialogue between Russian and Western scholars in this issue underscores the importance of collective action and shared knowledge in confronting the ecological crisis. It is hoped that this growing body of ecolinguistics research will deepen our mutual understanding of ecological discourse and inspire concrete initiatives in the direction of a more sustainable and resilient future and foster a united approach to the urgent ecological challenges of our time.

Key words: *ecological challenges, ecolinguistics, interdisciplinarity, environmental discourse, econarrative, discourse analysis*

For citation:

Poole, Robert. 2025. Ecolinguistics: Consolidating a research paradigm. *Russian Journal of Linguistics* 29 (1). 6–16. <https://doi.org/10.22363/2687-0088-43172>

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Эколингвистика: объединяя исследовательские парадигмы

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Аннотация

По мере углубления экологического кризиса, с которым сталкивается наша планета, роль понимания того, как язык формирует восприятие и поведение человека в отношении окружающей среды, становится особенно важной. Этот специальный выпуск посвящен эколингвистике — относительно новой междисциплинарной области лингвистики, которая изучает вопросы экологической значимости через призму языка и его функционирования. Данное направление имеет довольно эклектичную историю, и исследователи использовали термин «эколингвистика» в различных областях — от языковых контактов и освоения языка до языковой политики и би-/мультилингвизма. Однако сейчас представляется совершенно очевидным, что современная эколингвистика связана с дискурсивно-аналитическим подходом. Она исследует использование языка в различных контекстах с целью либо критиковать те дискурсивные практики, которые усугубляют экологическую деградацию, либо приветствовать альтернативные языковые практики, которые способствуют экологическому благополучию и устойчивости. В этой вступительной статье дается обзор последних достижений в области эколингвистики, выделяются основные направления исследований, уточняется спектр их методов и подходов. Она знакомит читателей со статьями этого номера, которые предлагают динамичные и многогранные взгляды на лингвистические аспекты экологических проблем, и подчеркивает их вклад в эколингвистические исследования. Проблемы, с которыми мы сталкиваемся, носят глобальный характер, и диалог между российскими и западными учеными в этом номере подчеркивает важность коллективных действий и совместных знаний в противостоянии экологическому кризису. Хочется надеяться, что растущий объем эколингвистических исследований углубит наше взаимопонимание в области экологического дискурса, вдохновит на конкретные инициативы в направлении более устойчивого и жизнестойкого будущего и будет способствовать единому подходу к решению неотложных экологических проблем современности.

Ключевые слова: экологические вызовы, эколингвистика, междисциплинарность, экологический дискурс, эконарратив, дискурс-анализ

Для цитирования:

Poole, Robert. Ecolinguistics: Consolidating a research paradigm. *Russian Journal of Linguistics*. 2025. Vol. 29. № 1. P. 6–16. <https://doi.org/10.22363/2687-0088-43172>

1. Introduction

Ecolinguistics is an interdisciplinary domain of inquiry that “explores the role of language in the life-sustaining interactions of humans, other species, and the physical environment” (International Ecolinguistics Association, n.d.). Though the field has a rather eclectic history with researchers invoking the term *ecolinguistics* in diverse spaces from language contact (Bastardas-Boada, 2017, Mufwene, 2001) and language acquisition (Lam & Kramsch, 2003, Leather & Van Dam, 2003) to language policy (Hornberger, 2003) and bi-/multilingualism (Hornberger, 2002,

Phillipson & Skutnab-Kangas, 1996). And while ecolinguistics may continue to serve as an “umbrella term” for research in the aforementioned spaces and beyond (Fill, 2017, p. 2), it seems now quite clear that contemporary ecolinguistics is most reflective of and aligned with a discourse analytic approach that interrogates language use in myriad contexts with aims to either challenge and critique ways of speaking and being that perpetuate ecological degradation or extol and elevate alternative language practices that contribute to wellbeing, sustainability, and justice. This special issue reflects and contributes to the burgeoning growth and broadening international scope of the field in recent years.

2. Recent developments

This issue is an additional data point amongst many illustrating the vitality of ecolinguistics. Presently, the International Ecolinguistics Association (IEA) boasts approximately 1,300 members and the online course developed and administered by the IEA has had greater than 5,000 registered participants since its inception less than a decade ago. Further, the International Conference on Ecolinguistics recently convened its eight meeting with iterations in Odense, Denmark; Beijing, China; Graz, Austria; Liverpool, United Kingdom and with a ninth forthcoming in Rennes, France in 2026. These international events are supported by a growing international community of scholars and active regional organizations in China, Uruguay, Italy, Japan, Cameroon, and Brazil as well as partnerships with groups such as International Environmental Communication Association, the Centre for Human Interactivity at the University of Southern Denmark, the International Systemic Functional Linguistics Association, and numerous others. Perhaps this special issue will give rise to further development of ecolinguistics within Russia.

The growth of ecolinguistics reflected in the previous discussion is further illustrated in the increase in scholarly publications in recent years. While *Language & Ecology* has long been devoted to publishing research in the field, it has been joined by the *Journal of World Languages* which similarly focuses upon scholarship in ecolinguistics. In addition to regularly featuring articles on ecolinguistics, it also released three special issues from 2022 to 2024 (Chau & Jacobs 2022, Ponton 2024a; Virdis 2022a). Additional special issues in ecolinguistics have been published by the journals *Text & Talk* (Ponton & Sokół 2022), *Cogent Arts & Humanities* (Goatly 2024), *Languages* (Ponton 2024b), and *Language Sciences* (Steffensen & Fill 2014). Further, Bloomsbury Academic Publishing now supports the Advances in Ecolinguistics Series—at the time of this writing, the series includes ten books on a diverse range of topics with the most recent being “Ecolinguistics and Environment in Education: Language, Culture and Textual Analysis” (Bellewes 2024), “Exploring Ecolinguistics: Ecological Principles and Narrative Practices” (Ponton 2024c), and “Language as Ecological Phenomenon: Linguaging and Bioecologies in Human-Environment Relationships” (Steffensen, Döring, & Cowley, 2024). With the forthcoming books

“How We Talk about Animals, and Why it Matters” (Sealey 2025) and “Ecolinguistics, Social Justice and Sustainability: Voices from the Global South” (Miless et al. 2025), the series’ record of excellence will certainly continue. And while Routledge released the first handbook devoted to the field in 2018 (Fill & Penz 2018), a second handbook is forthcoming from Bloomsbury. This impressive publication record of the field is documented in the free, online, publicly-available Zotero bibliography maintained by the IEA—it now includes approximately 700 publications.

These developments are indeed laudable and the international community of ecolinguistics should be proud of their achievements in recent years to raise attention to various issues of ecological importance. However, and unfortunately, this growth seems inexorably and undoubtedly tethered to and prompted by our worsening ecological crisis. As the consequences of continued climate inaction are realized in ever more frequent and severe disasters, researchers across applied linguistics and a variety of other disciplinary orientations are increasingly compelled to utilize their expertise and devote their research agendas to efforts towards ecological wellbeing and the formation of sustainable and just futures. In the seminal essay from Michael Halliday (1990/2001), which is broadly recognized as the impetus for ecological discourse analysis, he closed with the assertion that ecological crises are “not just problems for the biologists and physicists” but rather are “problems for the applied linguistics community as well” (Halliday 1990/2001: 199). Though the broader applied linguistics community may have been somewhat slow to recognize this reality and heed this call to action, researchers are turning their gaze to language use and its role in mediating our perceptions of and shaping our actions toward the more than human world.

3. Ecolinguistics today

Halliday’s groundbreaking essay (1990/2001) contributed significantly to the formation of ecolinguistics, but more recently, the influence of Arran Stibbe on the current state of the field has been unmatched as he has published multiple influential books and countless articles focused upon ecolinguistics. “The Handbook of Sustainable Literary” (2009) and “Animals Erased: Discourse, Ecology, and Reconnection with the Natural World” (2012) are both valued texts, but neither matches the profound influence that “Ecolinguistics: Language, Ecology and the Stories We Live By” (2015, 2020) had on the field. Providing a robust, unified, and comprehensive framework, he demonstrated how ecolinguistics could challenge the *stories-we-live-by* that exist and operate in the minds of individuals and across cultures which reflect, normalize, and (re)produce attitudes, beliefs, and practices that contribute to ecological degradation. Further, Stibbe illustrated how one must assert and acknowledge their individual ecosophy through which they may subsequently evaluate language use as beneficial, ambivalent, or destructive. More recently, Stibbe published “Econarrative: Ethics, Ecology, and the Search for New

Narratives to Live By” (2023). Forwarding a theory of econarrative, the book is poised to continue Stibbe’s influence on research in contemporary ecolinguistics.

Research in contemporary ecolinguistics is pursued in a variety of sites and with a range of methods and approaches. Perhaps unsurprisingly, researchers frequently advance studies into discourses of climate change and the environment within media, political, religious, advocacy, and corporate discourses (e.g., Al-Shboul 2023, Angwah 2019, 2022, Bednarek et al. 2022, Castello & Gesuato 2019, Chen & Liu 2024, Cunningham et al. 2022, Doring & Rattner 2018, Fløttum et al. 2014, Fløttum & Dahl 2011, Gjesdal & Andersen 2023, Poole & Hayes 2022, Penz 2022, Wang & Liu 2024). An additional site of analysis concerns the representation of animals with studies exploring how the discursive framings of animals often function to minimize and obscure animal suffering and oppression while justifying their consumption (e.g., Arcari 2017, Brown 2018, 2022, Cook & Ancarno 2019, Forte 2015, 2020, Frayne 2019, Fusari 2018, Gilbert et al. 2024, McCloughlin et al. 2022, Sealey & Oakley 2013, Stibbe 2001, 2003, 2005, 2012, Zhdanova et al. 2021). Research in these spaces may share an interest in climate change discourse or animal representation yet this body of work is far from homogenous, as studies employ various qualitative and quantitative methods to explore language use in countless contexts from opinion-editorials, user comments, social media, political debates, corporate sustainability reports, animal industry texts, non-governmental organization reports, wildlife documentaries, and much more.

Though these domains of climate change discourse and animal representation are often interrogated, and rightly so, ecolinguistics has broadened its scope in recent years with researchers exploring an ever-expanding range of sites through an array of analytic approaches. One area gaining increased attention is English language education, as researchers explore whether ecologically harmful discourses are embedded in textbooks and learning materials in classrooms from Pakistan (Zahoor & Janjua 2020), the United Kingdom (Akcesme 2013), Jordan (Al-Jamal & Al-Omari 2014), Indonesia (Triyono, Sahayu & Fath 2023), to China (Wang & Zainal 2024)—perhaps most noteworthy of the research in this space is Goulah and Katunich’s edited volume “TESOL and Sustainability: English Language Teaching in the Anthropocene” (2020) and Bellewes’ detailed treatment of how ecolinguistics can contribute to sustainable education (2024). Other scholars have extended ecolinguistics to stylistics and the analysis of poetic and literary texts (Goatly 2017; Viridis 2022b, 2022c, 2024; Zhu et al. 2023), storytelling and its potential for ecological transformation (Hampton 2022; Nanson 2021), representations of nature and human engagement in/with the more than human world (Istianah et al. 2024; Istianah & Suhandano 2022; Ponton, 2023a, 2023b), as well as disaster discourse and the representations of events such as wildfires and hurricanes (Bednarek et al. 2022; Potts 2015; Poole 2022; Poole 2024).

Again, this is not an exhaustive accounting of the many spaces in which ecolinguistics is pursued, and readers desiring to explore further are encouraged to

visit the Zotero bibliography maintained by the IEA and also Steffensen's (2024) recent bibliometric analysis of ecolinguistics research in the *Journal of World Languages*.

4. Comments on the Special Issue

The growth and diversification of ecolinguistics in recent years is well displayed in this special issue. First, just as ecolinguistics has become an international endeavor, so too are the authors of this collection from diverse national contexts. Ecolinguistics has experienced extraordinary international growth, but evidence of its development in Russia is rather limited—this issue is poised to rectify this absence. Importantly, each of the studies probes important and diverse issues of ecological relevance through rigorous and innovative approaches. The first article from **Alexander** and **Ponton** continues the rich tradition of ecolinguistics of exploring greenwashing practices which function to obscure corporate responsibility for ecological degradation and minimize the impact of their actions while simultaneously promoting themselves as champions of sustainability. And while this first entry in the special issue conducts this critical analysis of the discourse of a particular oil corporation, **Bondi** and **Nocella** similarly interrogate corporate discourse but with their attention focused upon a rail company and the narratives of responsibility and sustainability which it produces. The innovation of the special issue is best demonstrated in articles from **Druzhinin** on entrapped cognition, **Frayne** on nonverbal communication in environmental discourse, and **LaParle** on generative conversation and embodied narratives. While the first contributes to the development of cognitive ecolinguistics and the challenges posed by entrapped cognition for realizing more sustainable ways of being, Frayne demonstrates the insights to be reached through the analysis of nonverbal communication in environmental discourse and LaParle highlights the possibilities for generative conversation as a means to counter climate fatalism and promote ecological hope. Continuing, **Filardo-Llamas** and **Pérez-Hernández** continue an emerging trend that seeks not to analyze discourse of immediate and obvious ecological relevance such as a sustainability report from a corporation or an assessment report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change but rather extends their focus to a space—cycling discourse—where ecologically-positive identities and their concomitant language practices might be identified and then promoted. An additional study from **Abbamonte** and **Hughes** contributes to the emerging sub-domain of corpus-assisted ecolinguistics in its diachronic analysis of the eco-keyword *solastalgia*. Notably, this study contributes also to the development of diachronic corpus-assisted studies as well. And while these articles reflect trends and interests of contemporary ecolinguistics, **Kravchenko** challenges us to re-imagine the language sciences and ecolinguistics and undertake a paradigm shift for theorizing language and languaging in ways which might help us probe more deeply into “the elusive nature of humanness.”

5. In closing

In my view, this special issue makes a measurable and meaningful contribution to the continued development of ecolinguistics. Indeed, it represents the best characteristics of contemporary ecolinguistics for the studies perform essential critical analyses of discourses such as those from oil and rail industries that powerfully shape our worlds, contribute to the development of new lines of inquiry in cognitive ecolinguistics and nonverbal communication, applies corpus techniques for diachronic analysis of constructs of ecological relevance, and conducts positive discourse analysis in a space that to my knowledge has not yet been investigated. It achieves all of these goals while also challenging us to reflect deeply and carefully on the field and what it may yet become. I commend the editors of this volume for compiling such an eclectic, thoughtful, and innovative collection and applaud the authors for producing such high-quality research surely to inspire many in the ecolinguistics community.

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Article history:

Received: 24 February 2025

Accepted: 06 March 2025

Bionote:

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Роберт ПУЛ — доцент кафедры прикладной лингвистики и TESOL Университета Алабамы, США. В сферу его научных интересов входят корпусный дискурс-анализ, корпусная эколингвистика, устойчивое развитие языкового образования, использование корпусов в преподавании и изучении языка. Он является автором книги *Corpus-Assisted Ecolinguistics* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2022) и многочисленных статей в журналах *Applied Corpus Linguistics*, *Corpora*, *Journal of Corpora and Discourse Studies*, *Journal of World Languages* и др. В настоящее время является ведущим редактором «The Bloomsbury Handbook of Ecolinguistics», одновременно занимаясь исследованиями в области диахронической корпусной эколингвистики.

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