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An Ecolinguistic Approach to Critical Discourse Studies

Arran Stibbe

Abstract: This article explores the recently emerging area of ecolinguistics as a form of critical discourse study. While ecolinguistics tends to use the same forms of linguistic analysis as traditional critical discourse studies, the normative framework it operates in considers not just relationships of humans 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 as well as a application of an ecologically based normative framework for judging discourses against.

* * *

She might not think of herself as such, but the physicist and environmental activist Vandana Shiva shows many characteristics of an ecolinguist. Alexander (2010:112) describes how she 'uses her analytical ability to uncover the semantic engineering that goes on when global corporations colonize and destroy traditional agriculture in the Third World', uncovering 'the metaphors and the models underlying the so-called modernization of agriculture.' Shiva states, for example, that 'When patents are granted for seeds and plants, as in the case of basmati, theft is defined as creation and saving and sharing seed is defined as theft of intellectual property' (Shiva in Alexander 2010:118). In saying this, she is critiquing the discourse of Monsanto and the hegemonic forces of globalised agriculture. But more than that, Shiva seeks out and promotes alternative discourses that structure the world in very different ways, based on 'abundance and sharing, diversity and decentralisation, and respect and dignity for all beings' (Shiva in Alexander 2010:112).

In essence, ecolinguistics consists of questioning the stories that underpin our current unsustainable civilization, exposing those stories that are clearly not working, that are leading to ecological destruction and social injustice, and finding new stories that work better in the conditions of the world that we face. These are not stories in the traditional sense of a narrative, however, but rather discourses, frames, metaphors and, in general, clusters of linguistic features that come together to convey particular worldviews. Halliday (2001: 103) warns that 'There is a syndrome of grammatical features which conspire...to construe reality in a certain way; and it is a way that is no longer good for our health as a species'. Mühlhäusler (2003:91) similarly writes that 'grammatical constructions have developed in the more recent past that might encourage language habits which have contributed to our present environmental crisis.' Goatly (2001:203) goes further, stating that 'ordinary language, especially the transitive clause, is inadequate to the representation

of the world demanded by...ecological theory', disagreeing with Halliday that the problem lies in features such as nominalisation and instead critiquing the way clauses divide the world into agents and affected participants. In general, the 'linguistics' side of ecolinguistics holds out the promise of sophisticated analysis of the linguistic mechanisms by which worldviews are constructed, reproduced, spread and resisted while the 'eco' side promises a sophisticated ecological framework to consider the role of those worldviews in preserving or undermining the conditions that support life.

Not all those who call themselves 'ecolinguists' will recognise this characterisation of the discipline, however. There are those who apply an ecological metaphor to language contact and work towards the promotion of linguistic diversity as a metaphorical parallel to biodiversity (e.g. Bastardas-Boada 2005, 2003). There are those who apply concepts from ecology to linguistic theory itself, attempting to create a 'metamodel' to 'orchestrate all we observe about language and communication into one theory of language' (Boguslawska-Tafelska 2013:13). For some, ecolinguistics is just analysis of texts which happen to be about the environment, or even analysing texts such as road signs in their geographical locations. Of most relevance, however, for Critical Discourse Studies, is research which takes ecology literally, as the life-sustaining interactions of organisms (including humans) with other organisms and the natural environment. The objects of analysis, then, are discourses which have an impact on how humans treat each other, other organisms and the physical environment. This will include discourses such as those of conservation, which are specifically about the environment or ecology, but also discourses such as neoclassical economic discourse which, precisely through their omission of ecological consideration, can encourage people to behave in ways that are ecologically destructive.

Among the many discourses that have been analysed from an ecolinguistic perspective are discourses about: advertising (Hogben 2009, Slater 2007), economics (Stibbe 2005, Halliday 2001), environmentalism (Alexander 2010, Benton and Short 1999, Harré et al 1999), natural resources (Meisner 2007, Kurz et al 2005), energy (Russell et al 2011), animals (Stibbe 2012a, Goatly 2006, Glenn 2004), ecotourism (Milstein 2011, 2008), the concept of 'nature' (Knight 2010, Hanson 2006), climate change (Doulton and Brown 2009, Ihlen 2009), and sustainability (Kowalski 2013). Ecolinguistic studies vary in sophistication, comprehensiveness, depth of analysis and motivation, but some general characteristics of an ecolinguistic approach to discourse analysis are described below:

- a) The focus is on discourses that have (or potentially have) a significant impact not only on how people treat other people but also how they treat the larger ecological systems that life depends on.
- b) The discourses are analysed by showing how clusters of linguistic features come together to form particular worldviews or 'cultural codes'. A cultural code is 'a *compact package of shared values, norms, ethos and social beliefs...* [which] constructs and reflect the community's "common sense"' (Gavriely-Nuri 2012: 80). An example is the pervasive code

that sees unlimited economic growth as both a possible and a desirable goal for human societies.

c) The criteria that worldviews are judged by are derived from an explicit or implicit ecological philosophy (or ecosophy). An ecosophy is informed by both a scientific understanding of how organisms (including humans) depend on interactions with other organisms and a physical environment to survive and flourish, and also an ethical framework to decide why survival and flourishing matters and whose survival and flourishing matters.

d) The study aims to expose and draw attention to discourses which appear to be ecologically destructive (i.e., work against the principles of the ecosophy), or alternatively to seek out and promote discourses which could potentially help protect and preserve the conditions that support life (i.e., are aligned with the values of the ecosophy).

e) The study is aimed towards practical application through raising awareness of the role of language in ecological destruction or protection, informing policy, informing educational development, or providing ideas that can be drawn on in redesigning existing texts or producing new texts in the future.

Aside from the ecological dimension, these characteristics are similar to those of traditional Critical Discourse Analysis. A primary way that CDA contributes to social change is by raising awareness in order to stimulate what Stewart (1999:91) calls 'self-directed social movements'. These are movements which are 'created, led and populated primarily by those who perceive themselves to be dispossessed and....struggling primarily for personal freedom, equality, justice, and rights.' CDA operates by exposing how common sense assumptions built into the prevailing discourses of a society are 'common sense assumptions in the service of sustaining unequal relations of power' and how 'If one becomes aware that a particular aspect of common sense is sustaining power inequalities at one's own expense, it ceases to be common sense, and may cease to have the capacity to sustain power inequalities' (Fairclough 2001: 71). Ecolinguistics can also operate in this way, exposing how common sense assumptions within transnational capitalism play a role in destroying the ecological systems that oppressed communities depend on for their wellbeing and survival, and providing evidence and materials that self-directed social movements from these communities can use in working towards social change.

Ecolinguistics has another important focus, however, on what Stewart (1999:92) describes as 'other-directed social movements' - movements which 'are struggling for the freedom, equity, justice and rights of others rather than selves'. This is because many of the victims of ecological destruction are those who cannot be made conscious of the forces behind their oppression and do not have a voice to resist oppressive discourses: other species of animals, plants, forests, rivers, or future generations. As van Dijk (1993: 252) points out, critical discourse analysts take the perspective of 'those who suffer most from dominance and inequality...Their problems are...serious problems that affect the wellbeing

and lives of many'. For ecolinguists, that may (depending on their ecological philosophy) include those who suffer but are not human, or are likely to suffer in the future. The results of ecological destruction may also cycle back to have an impact on those responsible for them, or their children, which blurs the line between simplistic constructions of oppressors and oppressed (Goatly 2001). This requires a somewhat different approach since language awareness may be aimed not at raising consciousness among the oppressed of their own oppression, but among people in ecologically destructive societies about the impact of their societies on others, both human and non-human, close or distant, and present and future generations.

All critical studies are based on an explicit or implicit philosophy which gives an ethical vision of where societies should be heading, and they use this philosophy to judge discourses against. Typically in CDA this is a set of values concerning oppression, exploitation and inequality, and under what circumstances these are unacceptable and must be resisted (e.g., van Dijk 2008). In calling for a Cultural Critical Discourse Analysis, Gavriely-Nuri (2012:83) proposes a somewhat wider framework based on a 'culture of peace'. The framework (or ethical philosophy) promotes '*values, attitudes and behaviours based on the principles of freedom, justice and democracy, all human rights, tolerance and solidarity.*' Analysis is directed towards exposing discourses which work against these principles, and searching for 'discursive tools that practically promote the 'culture of peace'' (Gavriely-Nuri 2012:83). This is particularly useful because it is explicit, and does not disguise the fact that the analyst is, in essence, comparing and contrasting dominant discourses with their own ethical philosophy of how they see an ideal society.

What is missing from the 'culture of peace' framework, however, and many similar frameworks in CDA, is a consideration of the ecological embedding and impact of cultures. Freedom and democracy do not automatically lead to sustainable levels of consumption, and peace in a society that exceeds environmental limits will be short lived. Hiscock (2012) describes how contamination and over-exploitation of natural resources is one of the key drivers behind war. Ecolinguistic studies are based on a variety of different philosophical / ethical frameworks, but all consider ecological dimensions as well as social ones. Naess's (1996) term 'ecosophy' is useful for describing frameworks that ecolinguistic studies use to judge discourses against:

By an ecosophy I mean a philosophy of ecological harmony...openly normative it contains norms, rules, postulates, value priority announcements *and* hypotheses concerning the state of affairs ... The details of an ecosophy will show many variations due to significant differences concerning not only the 'facts' of pollution, resources, population, etc. but also value priorities. Naess (1996:8)

Ecosophies range along a series of spectra that broadly (but not completely) line up. The spectra run from anthropocentric to ecocentric, optimistic to pessimistic, neoliberal to

either socialist, localist or anarchist. The following paragraph gives a taste of some of these, to give an indication of the diversity of possible ecosophies rather than detail.

From one end of the spectrum, or spectra, there is 'cornutopianism', a philosophy which considers that human ingenuity and ever advancing technology will overcome environmental and resource issues and that we should push ahead with industrial progress for the sake of human (and only human) benefit (e.g., Lomborg 2001, Ridley 2011). Then there are a cluster of philosophies around sustainable development which attempt to combine economic growth and environmental protection, although often in ways that provide little challenge to existing social structures (e.g., Baker 2005). More radical is social ecology (e.g., Bookchin 2005), where the roots of ecological destruction are seen as existing in social hierarchies. According to social ecology, humans will not stop dominating nature and treating it as a resource until we stop dominating each other and treating each other as resources. Ecofeminism (e.g., Pandey 2011) similarly locates the roots of ecological crisis in domination, but particularly focuses on the parallels between men's domination of women and the oppression of animals and the environment. One of the tasks of ecofeminism is breaking down barriers so that the ecological sensitivity gained by women through their practical role in subsistence and community building is valued and used in rebuilding more ecological societies. Deep Ecology (e.g., Dregson and Young 1996) is based around recognising the intrinsic worth of plants, animals, forests, rivers, i.e., their value beyond direct, short-term use for humans. Recognising value in other species and nature is claimed to encourage protection and minimal damage to the complex ecosystems that support all life, including human life. There are also some practical movements which are based on their own ecosophies. Transition (e.g., Hopkins 2008) is based on a philosophy of 'resilience' as a key aim, as both climate change and the depletion of oil lead to an inevitable decline in the ability of the Earth to support human life. Transition is localist in encouraging communities to regain the skills to look after each other and fulfil their own needs in the troubled times ahead. The Dark Mountain Project (Kingsnorth and Hine 2009) sees even the hope of resilience as overly optimistic, and aims at generating new stories for survivors to live by after the inevitable collapse of industrial civilisation. The aim is to discover stories which do not repeat the same errors of the past and consider humans as part of the natural world rather than conquerors of it. Deep Green Resistance (McBay et al 2011) sees industrial civilisation as evil due to the damage and suffering it causes both humans and other species, and rather than waiting for it to destroy itself aims to hasten its destruction through carefully planned sabotage. At the far other end of the spectrum there is the semi-serious Voluntary Human Extinction Movement (VHEMT 2013), with a utilitarian philosophy that it would be better for one species (*homo sapiens*) to go extinct (voluntarily through a global decision not to have children) rather than the millions of species that humans are causing to go extinct.

It is for the ecolinguist, then, to survey the wide range of philosophies that are 'out there' in the literature critically, consider them carefully in light of available evidence and

their own experience of human communities and the natural world, and then build their own ecosophy through combining them, extending them or creating something entirely new. Gary Snyder, ecocritic, poet and philosopher, for instance, has built a personal ecosophy combining and extending aspects of social and deep ecology (Messersmith-Glavin 2010). The ecosophy has to be scientifically possible – for example an extreme version of sustainable development that promoted economic growth everywhere, even in the richest of countries, could be argued to be impossible given environmental limits. It has to be plausible, which the Voluntary Human Extinction Movement could be argued not to be since it relies on everyone in the world agreeing not to have children. And it has to be aligned with the available evidence: Transition, for example, is dependent on evidence that oil production is due to peak and decline, that climate change is occurring, and that both will have a serious impact on human society.

Analysis proceeds by showing how clusters of linguistic features come together in discourses to present a particular worldview, then judging the worldview against the ecosophy. Discourses can fall along a spectrum in terms of their 'fit' with the ecosophy. At one end are discourses which stand in active opposition to the ecosophy and are judged as negative discourses, ecologically destructive discourses, or using a simplistic traffic light metaphor, as discourses which get a red light. As an example, Halliday (2001:192) critiques discourses of economic growth, showing how growth is represented positively across a range of discourses, from news reports which make statements such as 'a more optimistic look includes prolonged air travel expansion driven by continued growth' (Sydney Morning Herald) to the word 'grow' itself, which as an unmarked term has a psychological positivity. Halliday critiques these discourses against his own ecosophy which is based on environmental limits to growth and the goal of the continuance of human life 'We are using up...capital resources...fresh water supplies and the agricultural soils which we *can't* live without.' (ibid: 192) as well as consideration of other species 'We are destroying many of the other species who form part of the planet's life cycle' (ibid: 192). Similarly, Gargan (2007) critiques the discourse of perfume advertisements from an ecosophy that considers the wellbeing of both human and other forms of life, exposing how the discourse encourages unnecessary consumption of toxic and energy-intensive products that have a negative impact on humans and other species. Stibbe (2003) analyses the discourse of animal product industries from an ecosophy of recognising and working *with* the nature of animals and plants to make maximum use of freely available ecosystem services. The analysis shows how discourses of the animal product industry works against this ecosophy by representing animals as objects, machines and resources, thereby denying their nature and justifying ecologically damaging intensive farming.

If discourses such as those of economic growth, advertising and intensive agriculture are analysed and declared to be ecologically destructive discourses, then there is the question of how ecolinguistics can be useful in resisting those discourses. One key way is through promoting Critical Language Awareness (Fairclough 1992) of the potentially

damaging effects of the discourse and providing materials that can be useful in resisting it. For instance, awareness of the manipulative effects of advertising discourse could help people resist it through reducing their exposure to advertising and being more critical about whether the products advertised are necessary and really lead to the benefits suggested in the advertisement. Or knowledge of the workings of advertisements could help in campaigns such as Adbusters (2013) which creates spoof advertisements to oppose the ideologies embedded in advertising discourse. Details about the workings of ecologically destructive economic discourses could be useful for groups like the New Economics Foundation or more radical groups such as UK Uncut, or the Occupy movement, which are working towards social and economic change.

Critical language awareness is most effective when it raises awareness of the destructive impact of discourses among those working directly in the areas responsible for them, e.g., raising awareness of the discourse of economic growth among economists and politicians who use (and therefore reproduce) the discourse. An optimistic perspective is that, in general, people do not want to contribute to social injustice and ecological destruction – these are side effects of discourses which have a narrow focus on other goals. If aware of the potentially destructive effects of a discourse, some within the area responsible for the discourses may call for change. An example of this is the poultry industry journal 'Poultry Science' which published an article that is worth quoting extensively:

Scholars (Stibbe, 2003; Linzey, 2006) have suggested that industry discourse characterizes animals in ways that objectify them (p387)... Although an analysis of discourse may seem odd and irrelevant...this type of examination is illuminating in some potentially beneficial ways (p390)... It may be necessary to reconsider several aspects of animal production relative to ideology, discourse, and practice. Transparency of contemporary animal production practices and a real ethic of care and respect for animals must be embodied not just in our practices but also in the internal and external discourse of animal agriculture. (Crony and Reynnells 2008, p390)

The importance of this extract is that it is from within the industry itself, and calls for a change not just at the level of language but also in 'our practices', i.e., the practices of the industry.

As well as destructive discourses, a key interest of ecolinguistics is in discourses which at first sight appear to be constructive and do not contradict the principles of the ecosophy, but at the same time do not seem to actively work towards those principles either. These could be called ambivalent discourses, or get an amber light. There are a range of dominant mainstream discourses that could be analysed in this way, including some environmentalist discourses, conservationist discourses, discourses of sustainable development and greenwashing. Harré et al (1999) give the name 'Greenspeak' to these kind of discourses, with negative Orwellian overtones of 'newspeak'.

Some environmental discourses could be criticised for focusing only on using resources more efficiently, small actions such as filling the kettle with less water or recycling, creating more efficient technology, or cleaning up pollution after it has been produced, none of which require a fundamental reconsideration of how much is consumed overall and who consumes it. If the ecosophy is based on an extensive overall reduction of human consumption in order to protect ecosystems, while simultaneously reducing poverty and creating more equitable societies, then a large-scale redistribution of resources is necessary to bring people out of poverty even as the total consumption declines. Environmental discourses which fail to consider redistribution or a reduction in consumption could therefore be criticised according to the ecosophy. Or if the ecosophy revolves around generating respect and care for other species and nature then some conservation discourses could be critiqued for only encouraging respect for a narrow range of species - the large, cuddly varieties (Thompson 2010). And finally, some ecological discourses could be critiqued for representing nature and other species as objects or resources of instrumental rather than intrinsic value (Stibbe 2012a).

At the other end of the spectrum are discourses which resonate with and are aligned with the ecosophy of the analyst - positive discourses, beneficial discourses, discourses which get a green light. Alexander's (2010) study of the discourse used by Vandana Shiva at the start of this paper is an example – clearly Shiva's discourse aligns with Alexander's own ecosophy, as visible from the positive evaluation of Shiva's 'achievement' throughout his analysis (see p113). Bringhurst (2006), in his own version of 'ecological linguistics', searches Native American languages, literature and cultures for new stories to live by:

I am convinced, myself, that [Native American] stories and poems are often of great practical value as well as artistic merit. They are the legacy, after all, of peoples who knew how to live in this land for thousands of years without wrecking it...If we do want to learn to live in the world, I think that the study of Native American literature is one of the best and most efficient ways to do just that...the fundamental subject of this thought, this intellectual tradition, is the relationship between human beings and the rest of the world (ibid., p26)

Stibbe (2012a) analyses a range discourses from Japanese haiku and animated films to the lyrical science writing of Rachel Carson, as examples of positive discourses which encourage respect for nature and the fulfilling of human needs in ways which do not rely on excess consumption. The discourses analysed may, of course, be exactly the same discourses which inspired the ecosophy in the first place – no surprise then that they align and resonate with it then. That is not a problem, however, since the aim of the analysis is not just to come to a binary conclusion 'good' or 'bad' but also to reveal the specific ways that clusters of linguistic features come together to express a particular worldview. And, of course, even the most 'positive' discourses are always treated critically since they may be internally contradictory or have unintended side effects which can be revealed through analysis.

Martin and Rose (2003) introduced the term 'Positive Discourse Analysis' for this type of analysis, and the concept was further developed by Macgilchrist (2007) and Bartlett (2012). However, the term has proved controversial. Wodak (in Kendall 2007), for instance, argues that the term 'critical' does not imply 'being negative' and that 'proposing alternatives is also part of being critical' (17). Clearly though, the overwhelming majority of work in both Critical Discourse Analysis and ecolinguistics is about negative evaluation of discourses which run counter to the analyst's beliefs and values. Martin is right to emphasise the importance of analysing positive discourses, since if ecolinguistics aims to make a practical difference then it is necessary to not only show where discourses are encouraging ecological destruction but also to give avenues for shaping discourses differently. Wodak is also right in the sense that the analysis stage of both negative and positive discourses is the same, but it is the practical application that is different: positive discourses are, of course, promoted rather than resisted. This is not promoting the 'texts' - for example promoting the works of Rachel Carson - but rather the discourses, i.e., the specific clustering of linguistic features that convey the worldview. An understanding of how the discourse used by Rachel Carson brings together linguistic features in ways which express scientific knowledge but without devaluing other species by turning them into 'specimens' or 'resources' could be useful in helping to reshape environmental discourse. Or an understanding of how Vandana Shiva resists imposed metaphors from the West and uses language in ways which reassert the traditional metaphors of local cultures could be used to give tired and compromised 'sustainable development' discourses a new spark of life.

Conclusion

Kate Soper (2011) laments that 'To date, there has been no attempt seriously to challenge the definition of the 'good life' associated with affluent consumer culture...'. Challenging consumer culture is hard because it is so deeply embedded in so many discourses, from advertising to news reports and the everyday conversation of friends admiring each other's possessions, and consumerism is so often overlooked as a target for action in mainstream environmental discourses. This is the kind of challenge that ecolinguistics is able to address, through exposing the ecologically destructive ways that everyday discourses construct notions of the 'good life', providing tools to help resist those discourses, and searching for beneficial discourses which actively identify the 'good life' with something other than consumerism. And going further than the 'good life' and consumer culture, ecolinguistics can address how discourses shape vital (quite literally 'necessary for life') relationships between humans, other species and the physical environment in many different ways.

This article has just described one form of ecolinguistics – there are other existing forms and other potential ways than an 'ecolinguistics' could be constructed. The approach outlined in this article is well aligned with critical discourse studies since the methods of analysis are much the same, with the main difference being the philosophical framework

that underlies the values and goals against which discourses are judged. Ecolinguistics has potential to contribute to theory building within critical discourse studies because the wide range of data analysed can reveal new insights into how language constructs society, and the different approaches require the refinement of existing tools or the development of new ones. For instance, ecolinguistics needs more sophisticated tools for analysis of discursive erasure, in order to investigate the complex linguistic ways that nature is erased from mainstream discourses – including, incidentally, the discourse of CDA (Stibbe 2012b). Ecolinguistics needs a more comprehensive theory of the discursive formation of identity to examine how ecological identities are forged in language, and on the applied side, and it needs to further develop theories of related to ‘other-directed’ social movements.

In sum, what ecolinguistics potentially has to offer critical discourse studies is a) an expanded range of issues of importance for discourse analysts to address b) a more comprehensive and explicit philosophical framework for judging discourses against – one which does not gloss over ecological aspects, and c) theoretical insights into ‘how discourse works’ derived from examining new data from a new approach. It is, however, an emerging area, with few studies of depth and sophistication, and it is a divided area, with the term ‘ecolinguistics’ being given to a range of different approaches and preoccupations. Perhaps the ideal future for ecolinguistics is for numerous new studies to emerge that are based on explicit and well-thought-out ecosophies and are practically useful in resisting the discourses that underlie an ecologically destructive and socially unjust society. And then, eventually, ecolinguistics and all the other ‘eco’ disciplines (ecopsychology, ecofeminism, ecocriticism) can disappear as separate entities. They will no longer be necessary when critical studies of all kinds, as a matter of course, consider ecological embedding of the humans and human societies that they study.

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