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A sociolinguist's perspective on ecolinguistics as a critical, interdisciplinary, and activist endeavor

The global ecological crisis is a crucial issue that calls for interdisciplinary research capable of addressing real-world problems. Ecolinguistics has emerged as a discipline that concerns how language relates to these global issues (Stibbe, 2020; Steffensen & Fill, 2014; Fill & Penz, 2018). Until currently, ecolinguistics has been approached and defined through a variety of interdisciplinary frameworks, including ecology, linguistics, language education, anthropology, psychology, and philosophy (Steffensen & Fill, 2014; van Lier, 2004). This presentation argues for yet another less discussed conceptualization that views ecoinguistics from a sociolinguistic perspective and seeks to clarify how ecolinguistics is situated within linguistics and the broader interdisciplinary landscape from the perspective of sociolinguists.

The intrinsic relationship between language and environment was discussed in Sapir's (1912) paper, while a formal conceptualization of language ecology was found in Haugen's (1972) work, which refers to the social relationships between languages. A stronger ecological focus was made by Halliday (1992) when he challenged linguists to study the “new ways of meaning” that promote ecological awareness through language and discourse. After Halliday, most ecolinguistics studies are framed within the study of language ecology (Mühlhäusler, 2000), language education (van Lier, 2004; Kramsch, 2008), literacy (Kravchenko, 2016), and critical discourse analysis (Alexander & Stibbe, 2014).

As the first in a series of interviews with leading contemporary linguists, this study represents an initial step toward synthesizing expert insights into the current and future directions of ecolinguistics. This study adopts a qualitative approach, drawing on an in-depth interview with the critical sociolinguist Dr. Ruanni Tupas as its primary data source. Thematic analysis was carried out to identify the crucial themes and viewpoints, which were then contextualized through relevant literature in ecolinguistics and the other related disciplines.

The finding shows that ecolinguistics has solid interdisciplinary foundations and is properly understood not as a narrow subfield but as a broad and interdisciplinary study that is critical and activism oriented. Since ecolinguistics is inherently the study of discourse, it examines how language constructs, maintains, and challenges the relationship between humans and the environment (Steffensen & Fill, 2014; Penz & Fill, 2022). This requires a broad and interdisciplinary approach to understand the complexity of power relations (van Lier, 2004; Kramsch, 2008; Steffensen & Fill, 2014) and to make what is invisible visible to society (Fairclough, 2023; Tupas, 2015). It does not only describe what language is, but it actively questions how discourse is used to justify environmental damage and social inequality (Tupas, 2015; Alexander & Stibbe, 2014; Fairclough, 2023).

Finally, this conceptualization requires the relevant methodologies to contribute meaningfully to social and environmental justice. This inquiry also seeks to uncover possible methodological approaches that can enrich and expand research in this emerging field. Future research in ecolinguistics needs engaged and grounded methodological approaches, such as community-based, ethnographic, collaborative, critical or positive discourse analysis, and other holistic and iterative approaches.

Key words: Ecolinguistics, Critical Sociolinguistics, Critical Discourse Analysis, Interdisciplinary Studies, Language and Power, Environmental and Social Justice

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