

## ECOLINGUISTICS AND TOURISM

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### Abstract

*The increasingly rapid environmental degradation, pollution, climate change, and biodiversity loss have led to the urgent need to address these issues. A response within linguistics is the emergence of ecolinguistics. Focused on fostering environmental awareness and sustainability, ecolinguistics has much to offer. It, however, still seems to be somewhat neglected. This paper sheds light on the current state of ecolinguistics, highlighting its appropriateness for addressing tourism-related texts. After discussing the main aspects of ecolinguistics, and a brief look at some relevant contributions, it ends with a small-scale qualitative analysis of eco-relevant terms in two government documents for defining the course of tourism development in Serbia. The findings indicate a shift towards more ecologically beneficial narrative, yet with a continued focus on economic prosperity.*

**Key Words:** *ecolinguistics, tourism discourse, eco-relevant terms, ecolinguistic analysis*

**JEL classification:** *I290, Z00*

### Introduction

The field of linguistics is far from being constant and resistant to change. Rather, it is continually expanding and diversifying due to various factors that mainly reflect the complex changes in society. Among the major are massive technological advancements, novel approaches to pursuing knowledge, the rise of differing societal needs, and interdisciplinary

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collaboration. Each factor individually, or in combination, has contributed to the emergence of an array of more specialized sub-fields of language study. One of the most recent is ecolinguistics, also known as ecological linguistics and language ecology.

The very term makes it clear that the intricate relationship between ecology and linguistics is at the core of this sub-field of applied linguistic research, which emerged as a response to the ecological crises (Zhou, 2022). Set at the interface of the natural sciences and the humanities, ecolinguistics is becoming increasingly complex and multifaceted. Be it seen as „a branch of linguistics” (Fill & Muhlhausler, 2001, p. 1), „a well established discipline” (Couto, 2014, p. 125), „an approach to studying human-nature interactions” (LeVasseur, 2015, p. 21), or „a platform from which we could study any language phenomena” (Couto, 2014, p. 122), ecolinguistics helps us better understand how language influences and reflects our interactions with the natural environment. What is important is that it extends to practical applications that can stimulate the ecological well-being and sustainability (LeVasseur, 2015; Poole, 2022).

However, given the considerable environmental challenges facing the global community, ecolinguistics seems to have received less scholarly attention than might be expected. LeVasseur (2015), for instance, observed that „the insights and methods of ecolinguistics are an underappreciated and underutilized approach” (p. 21). By way of illustration, the keyword search performed in March 2024 on the Serbian citation index database (SCIndex, <https://scindeks.ceon.rs/>) yielded no results. This paper, therefore, aims to address the key tenets and insights of ecolinguistics, emphasizing its relevance for the study of tourism discourse.

### **The Realm of Ecolinguistics**

The roots of ecolinguistics can be traced back to the early 1970s when the link between any language and its environment was first pointed out (Fill, 1998). After a slow start, the interest in this interrelation revived in the 1990s, leading to the consolidation of ecolinguistics as a discipline (Couto, 2014). The author most often cited in connection with the birth of ecolinguistics is one of the world’s leading linguists, M. A. K. Halliday, specifically his 1992 talk, later reprinted (Halliday, 2001). Ecolinguist research has since evolved rapidly, progressing in numerous different directions.

The understanding of what ecolinguistics is varies considerably among scholars (see LeVasseur, 2015), making it „a lively field” (Couto 2014, p. 126). It is commonly taken in its broadest sense as „an umbrella term that covers any linguistic research that adopts an ecological perspective (or ecological research that attends to language)” (Zhou, 2022, p. 472). In other words, one comprehensive and universally accepted definition lacks, as already observed (Alexander & Stibbe, 2014). Evidence of this is the number of studies that reflect on the state of the art in ecolinguistics, aiming to delineate the field, pinpoint different approaches and propose future directions (e.g. Chen, 2016; Couto 2014; Fill, 1998, LeVasseur, 2015; Zhou, 2022), not infrequently calling for an unified ecolinguistic framework (e.g. Steffensen & Fill, 2014, Stibbe, 2014). Considering the availability of the comprehensive overviews, we will highlight only the ideas and observations crucial to the stance held in the paper.

In his seminal talk, Halliday (2001) warned that „there is no historical necessity that this planet will survive in a habitable form”, only a possibility and, hence, „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.” (p. 199). Underlying this is the view that the language we use can affect and shape the extra-linguistic reality, and consequently linguistic research can be a valuable aid in solving environmental and other social problems. This is mirrored in Stibbe’s (2015) position that ecolinguistics is „about critiquing forms of language that contribute to ecological destruction and aiding in the search for new forms of language that inspire people to protect the natural world” (p. 1).

Another important trajectory shaping the research field concerns the rapid decline in language diversity and language endangerment in the increasingly globalized world (Fill 1998, 2018). Discerning these two strands of research is, however, oversimplification of the entire ecolinguistic enterprise. The approach essentially depends on how ecology is understood (Fill, 1998). Steffensen and Fill (2014), for instance, distinguish four ways in which the ecology of language has been conceptualised (a symbolic ecology, a natural ecology, a sociocultural ecology, and a cognitive ecology). In a more recent study, Zhou (2022) further highlights the diversity and complexity in the current landscape of ecolinguistics, pointing to various definitions which have involved geographical, conceptual, disciplinary, methodological, and practical sides.

The increasing diversification goes hand in hand with, or better still, results from the increase in publications on ecolinguistics in the 21st century. First of all, several book-length publications appeared, notably those (co-)authored by Fill (Fill & Mühlhäusler, 2001; Fill & Penz, 2018) and Stibbe (2015), which paved the way for subsequent work. Chen's (2016) quantitative meta-analysis from the perspective of journal publications demonstrates an increase in studies related to ecolinguistics between 1991 and 2015. What may be surprising is the heterogeneity in terms of their research subjects. Following Chen (2016), they fall into the following categories: (a) language learning and teaching, (b) theorization and historical analysis, (c) language policy and planning, (d) language in contact, and (e) discourse analysis (p. 112). The last mentioned is of particular interest to the paper.

### **Ecolinguistics and Discourse Analysis**

As the very term suggests, the major concern of ecolinguistics is the way the language is used in relation to the environment. Nowadays, the prevailing view is that ecolinguistics involves „the study of the impact of language on the life-sustaining relationships among humans, other organisms and the physical environment” (Alexander & Stibbe, 2014, p. 104). Reasonably, then, the key topic is the analysis of „environmental discourse” (LeVasseur, 2014), or so-called greenspeak, with the main aim of investigating the role language plays in „describing, but also aggravating and perhaps alleviating, environmental problems” (Fill, 2018, p. 3).

There is no one specific method used for this purpose. Instead, ecolinguists have drawn on various methods and empirical approaches such as theoretical linguistics, semantic analysis, multimodality, critical discourse analysis, corpus linguistics, and pragmatics, as can be seen from collections (Fill & Mühlhäusler, 2001; Fill & Penz, 2018). Equally extensive is the range of features of the language system that ecolinguistics have scrutinized, including, among others, collocations, the use of pronouns, passivization, agency, and the role of metaphors (Fill, 1998, Poole 2022). As an illustration, we can mention climate communication that has, understandably, attracted special attention, and thus has been approached from multiple perspectives (see Penz, 2018). As shown (Penz, 2018), the concept of climate change has managed to replace global warming, as it has less threatening collocations.

The majority of the data analyzed are the texts that explicitly deal with ecology, environmentalism, and biological conservation and come from media, mainly newspaper, discourse. The texts that attend to ecological concerns, and are thus appropriate for ecolinguistic study, have also come from other domains, including corporate and political discourse, economics, and advertising (Poole, 2022; Stibbe, 2014).

Alexander and Stibbe (2014) posit that ecolinguistics should extend its scope to any other discourse which can potentially induce ecologically beneficial or harmful behaviours. Thus, discourses from consumerism to nature poetry have been analysed, largely from a critical discourse analytic perspective that Stibbe (2014, 2015) advocates for. The main goal is to unveil discursive practices, frames, metaphors and clusters of linguistic features that convey particular worldviews, i.e. stories (Stibbe, 2014, 2015). Once uncovered, these stories, e.g. economic growth is always positive, should be replaced by new ones, which ecolinguistics can help us search for (Stibbe, 2015). Stibbe's approach has also proven to be well suited to the study of tourism discourse, as mentioned below.

### **Ecolinguistic Studies on Tourism Discourse**

Tourism is diversified industry consisting of several important sectors (e.g. transportation, accommodation, ancillary services, travel agencies, and attractions). It is often described as an important drive of the overall socio-economic development of national economies, Serbia being no exception. The fact that it is one of the fastest-growing industries worldwide should, therefore, be highly advantageous. However, the increase in mass tourism the recent decades have seen is not without its downsides. Most importantly, it has brought about serious hazards to the natural environment, thereby giving rise to new more environmentally friendly turns in tourism, such as eco-tourism, green tourism and sustainable tourism. This has provided strong stimulus to look into tourism discourse from an ecolinguistic perspective.

Scholars now agree that the language serving tourism industry is characterized by particular stylistic, lexical, grammatical and semantic features, which makes it a specialized type of discourse distinct from general language and from other professional discourses (e.g. Maci, 2018). Due to the heterogeneity of the industry, it encompasses numerous genres. They can be seen as belonging to the following thematic blocks: 1) theoretical reflections on the phenomenon of tourism and its main

features, 2) organization and management, and 3) description and promotion of tourist destinations (Calvi, 2010).

It is the promotional genres that have attracted ecolinguists the most. Pogodaeva and Yu (2020), for instance, have analyzed a collection of promotional texts in French (tourist brochures, prospects, posters and Internet sites) to identify the priorities in the organization of tourism services that are associated with ecotourism. Ponton and Asero (2018) focused their study on the notion of sustainability for the cruise industry. As their analysis of ten websites that promote sustainable cruises shows, major cruise lines address sustainability issues, but implement relatively minor policies and practices (e.g. waste management, water treatment policy), thereby leaving much room for future actions that would balance the growing demand for cruising against its negative environmental impacts. This study adopts a critical perspective, as does Istianah and Suhandano's (2022) analysis of Kalimantan tourism texts from its official website. Following Stibbe (2015), the authors investigate appraisal patterns, and show that those manifested through attitude and graduation systems permeate the analyzed texts, reflecting the ideology of the marketization of natural richness and endangerment.

### **Eco-relevant Terms in National Strategic Tourism Documents**

In this section, we analyze eco-relevant terms in two national documents that define the course of tourism development in Serbia: one published in 2005 (H. C. Zagreb & Ekonomski fakultet Beograd, 2005) and the other in 2016 (Vlada Republike Srbije, 2016), i.e. 2005 Strategy and 2016 Strategy, respectively. Since the former is not available in English, we used the Serbian versions of the two national strategies and searched for the following terms: *ekologija/ekološki* (*ecology/ecological*), compounds with *eko-* (*eco-*), *sredina* (*environment*), and *održivost/održiv* (*sustainability/sustainable*).

The findings reveal that the sensitivity to ecological issues and awareness of the negative impacts of tourism has increased. The most obvious indicator is the strong presence of the adjective *ekološki* and the contexts of its use in the latter document. The 2005 Strategy makes mention of „*ecological*” *products*, envisions a future tourist as *ecologically and socially sensitive* (*ekološki i socijalno senzitivan*), and also points to *visoki ekološki standardi i zaštita prostora* (*high environmental standards and environment protection*) as one of the features of Serbia tailored to its

citizens. In the 2016 document, on the other hand, the adjective occurs eight times, often in contexts that explicitly refer to the concerns for environment. For instance, the Strategy promotes the use of renewable energy sources in tourism facilities in order to make the surrounding areas *ekološki čistije* (*more ecologically/environmentally clean*) (Vlada Republike Srbije, 2016, p. 90). More importantly, as its first goal, the Strategy lists *održivi ekonomski, ekološki i socijalni razvoj turizma* (*sustainable economic, ecologic, and social development of tourism*) in the country (Vlada Republike Srbije, 2016, p. 90). In contrast to the use of the corresponding adjective, the latter document offers fewer eco-compounds. In the 2005 Strategy, *eko-muzeji* (*eco-museums*), *eko-ture* (*eco-tours*), and *eko-safari* (*eco-safari*) occur, yet only in isolation, along with *eko-turizam* (*eco-tourism*), by far the most prominent compound in the two documents. Eco-tourism is defined in the 2005 Strategy, as tourism that supports the preservation of natural resources and is considered one of the tourism products with the greatest development potentials. Mainly, it is considered as a segment of the rural tourism product, eliciting the compound *eko-ruralni turizam* (*eco-rural tourism*). In the latter document, ecotourism only occurs in the lists of products specific to particular Serbian tourism destinations. It is particularly noteworthy that this document points to the *ekosisteme* (*ecosystems*) that characterize protected natural areas, especially their degradation directly influenced by mass tourism and non-compliance with conversation measures (Vlada Republike Srbije, 2016, p. 74).

Consistent with this observation are the findings related to the noun *sredina* (*environment*), which likewise indicate the shift of the attitude towards other non-human animals. In the 2005 Strategy, *sredina* occurs once in the collocation *čovekova sredina* (literally: *human environment*), clearly contradicting the principles of ecosophy, whereas in the 2016 document only *životna sredina* (the living environment) is used. Furthermore, the latter document embraces a more systematic approach, taking into account the multiple effects the development of tourism has on, among other things, *unapređenje životne sredine* (*the improvement of the environment*) (Vlada Republike Srbije, 2016, p. 2).

While *održivost* is practically absent from the analyzed document, the adjective *održivi* occurs in both documents, and, again, is more frequent in the 2016 Strategy. Besides one collocation with *tourism* (*održivi turizam, sustainable tourism*), the principles of *sustainable development* (*održivog razvoja*) and nature preservation are explicitly mentioned. Yet,

the impression is that the adjective is mainly used in connection with economic aspects. It appears with the following nouns: *rast* (*growth*), *razvoj* (*development*), and *system* (*system*); moreover, at one point in the 2016 document, the adjective is explained as ‘without the assistance of the state’.

The findings, then, testify to the greater efforts on the part of tourism policy makers towards more sustainable ways of tourism development and incorporating environmental goals in the 2016 Strategy, which makes it more ecologically beneficial than the previous one. Still, alongside the incorporated environmental goals, the central focus is on economic prosperity, which may, in practice, lead to giving priority to economic factors over environmental concerns.

### **Concluding Remarks**

In this paper, we have tried to make a case for ecolinguistic analysis of tourism discourse. As an illustration, two tourism-related official documents have been analyzed. Despite its simplicity, the analysis, we believe, demonstrates the efficacy of this approach. Some prospective studies might, then, consider taking this path of enquiry into various tourism-related texts, especially from a critical perspective, which will show whether and how environmental goals fit into the objectives of economic growth.

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