



Ecolinguistics: Towards a Cognitive Ecology of Language

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If the rapid changes in the earth systems (global warming, loss of biodiversity, acidification of the oceans, etc.) are caused by human behaviour, and if language plays a role in human behaviour, what is then the role of language in the current crisis?

This and similar questions are pursued in ecolinguistics. The intersection of language and ecology has been a topic in the language sciences since the early 1970s (Haugen 1972), leading to the formation of ecolinguistics in the early 1990s (for an overview, see Steffensen 2024a,b). In recent years, there has been a renewed focus on the theoretical underpinnings of the field. The main tenet of this work has been to argue that language is not only about nature (as in discourse analysis), but also of nature (Steffensen et al. 2024).

In part, this development has been driven by an attempt at grounding ecolinguistics in recent developments in cognitive science, including distributed cognition (Hutchins 1995, Li et al. 2020), radical embodied cognitive science (Chemero 2013, Steffensen and Cowley 2021), ecological psychology (Gibson 1979, Steffensen and Baggs 2024), and cognitive ecology (Hutchins 2010, Tribble and Sutton 2011).

After half a century of computational models of cognition, these programs are questioning the idea that cognition is a disembodied, computational property of “single-minded” agents (Dingemanse et al. 2023). Instead, they suggest that cognition, action, and perception play out in the interactions between embodied agents and their social and natural environment. They study cognitive ecosystems, that is, coalitions of interacting bodies, artefacts, cultural norms, and social habits.

Placing language within a cognitive ecology provides a fertile starting point for understanding the intersection between language, social interaction, cognitive events, and the environment in which we live. This development can be taken in two directions. On the one hand, one can use it to scrutinize how language interweaves with mundane activities in the human lifeworld. On the other hand, one can investigate the linguistic dimensions of the ecological crises (and other large-scale societal problems).

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