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A Critical Review of Ecolinguistic Studies in Iran

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Abstract

Ecolinguistics first emerged in the 1990s and, based on the International Ecolinguistics Association's definition, it strives to explore "the role of language in the life-sustaining interactions of humans, other species and the physical environment" (IEA, 2018). Traditionally, two major research routes have developed worldwide to deal with the endangerment of biodiversity as well as language communities from an ecolinguistic standpoint. However, the new line of research as introduced by Stibbe (2015), seeks to uncover the stories behind human's decisions and actions and their impacts on "life" as a whole. This way we will be able to convert destructive stories into constructive ones to respect, revive and save all forms of life. For the Iranian linguistic community, however, this relatively new field has to go a long way to be known. It is only twenty years that some scholars have tried to research ecolinguistics, although there is great potential in Iran, considering the current challenges the whole country is facing with regard to environmental issues as well as depleting resources. Iranian ecolinguistic studies are far too distant from similar international efforts, but can generally be divided into two categories of morphological and discourse studies. In this paper, we review nearly all Iranian publications bearing the name "ecolinguistics" and, at the end, we suggest toponymy studies and positive discourse analysis as two important lines of research within this branch of linguistics.

Keywords: ecolinguistics, Persian language, morphology, discourse analysis, linguistics, environmental studies.

1. Introduction

Following Haugen's seminal publication in 1972 in which he defined "language ecology", Fill (1998), Mühlhäusler (2000a, 2000b, 2002, 2003; Mühlhäusler & Fill, 2001; Mühlhäusler & Peace, 2006), Halliday (2001), and other prominent linguists researched the interrelation of language, ecology, and society, resulting in the establishment of ecolinguistics as a new branch in linguistics. In fact, these scholars encouraged their peer linguists to challenge language in the context of society and ecology, as a response to the emerging threats of environmental destruction due to technological advancements in human societies. Since then, two major lines of research have been established within the ecolinguistic realm. First, the relationship between human communities and their surrounding environment (Nash, 2011). This line of research is also concerned with language extinction/endangerment as a result of environmental destruction and the degradation of natural habitats of various fauna and flora species, which subsequently will affect human communities that profit from those resources and the survival of which is at risk. Couto (2014), Nash's toponymy studies (2011, 2015, 2016; Nash & Mühlhäusler, 2014) and Nettle's study of language diversity in Africa (1996) are among those works which contributed to this area of research.

Second, there is ecological discourse analysis that discusses how languages (i.e. lexicon, grammar, and any forms of media) deal with environmental issues; how linguistic forms can raise awareness on and/or understate environmental issues. Halliday's critical view on insufficiency of English grammar with regard to mass/plural nouns (2001: 194) is the pioneering research of this second category.

Despite the notable amount of ecolinguistic research since the emergence of ecolinguistics in the 1990s, it lacked an explicit definition which would clearly identify its position within the realm of linguistics. Perhaps Stibbe's (2015) *Ecolinguistics: Language, Ecology, and the Stories We Live By* is a turning point in ecolinguistics, since it gives a very clear picture of the links between language and environment, and the mission of ecolinguistics as a sub-field of linguistics which "explores the role of language in the life-sustaining interactions of humans, other species and the physical environment" (IEA, 2018). Stibbe (2015) has perfectly introduced eight forms that human's relationship with his surrounding environment, or "stories" as he names them, can take as ideologies, frames, metaphors, evaluations, identities, convictions, erasures, and salience. In this very new tradition, no unique theory is prescribed and the researcher is free to choose the approach that best fits their subject matter with regard to the category of stories it belongs to. Regardless of the approach, the ultimate goal is the analysis of linguistic patterns in order to reveal the stories we live by (Stibbe, 2015). Afterwards, the story is assessed in terms of being destructive or constructive with regards to the environment. A destructive story should be abandoned, while a constructive one should be promoted.

Compared to the picture of ecolinguistics worldwide, whether the traditional or the new, the Iranian linguistic community is not yet well acquainted with this field; during the last two decades, only few academic efforts have been published, all in Persian and

therefore, none known internationally. The few Iranian studies that can be named in this field are limited to some small-scale studies on morphological characteristics of some specific words collected from language communities living in different areas with different climate and geographic features. These studies do not, however, delve deeper to investigate the impact of those environmental features on the formation of region-specific linguistic forms.

Another line of research in Iran is the discourse studies which tend to analyze texts of different kinds from an ecological point of view. However, the nature of the job is not comparable to the similar global trend.

In what follows, nearly all Persian research papers and dissertations containing the keyword "ecolinguistics" will be reviewed in two separate sections. At the end, final remarks will be presented and we will suggest that apart from toponymy, which has a great potential to be researched in Iran, positive discourse analysis can bring about new stories to live by, considering the fact that this country will soon have to face water scarcity, depleting natural resources on which the economy has been built on, and the nature with all its living species being used up in the name of "development" by us humans who have no respect for other life forms.

2. Iranian Ecolinguistic Research[1]

Most academic attempts during the last two decades have primarily focused on describing the influence of nature on language through studying morphological characteristics of names local people in different regions in Iran select for their agricultural tools, products, foods, animals, and so on. We classify this type of research as "Morphological Studies". A very few studies have tried to focus on discourse analysis of language-environment interaction. This category, "Discourse Studies" as we name it, will follow the morphological studies section.

There is a third line of research – toponyms – that is yet to emerge but has great potential to become a hot topic at least in Iran. The only research that addressed toponyms from an ecolinguistic perspective in Iran was conducted by Albuquerque et al. (2018), in which the researchers compared the mechanisms of place naming in two different regions; Sergipe a Northeastern Brazilian region and Gilan the Northern Iranian province. They concluded that the mechanisms in both locations under study are in close connection with their natural environment and that both languages fall within Nash's (2015) category of "ecologically embedded languages". We did not consider a separate category for this type of studies, since no academic papers of this type were identified in the Iranian ecolinguistic research studies.

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[1] The labels used here to address the two different strands of Iranian ecolinguistic research might look old-fashioned, as compared to the multifaceted definition provided by the International Ecolinguistics Association (referred to in the previous section).

2.1. Morphological Studies²

Barati (2003) in his book *Language, Mind, and Space* compared some Persian words with their English equivalents in an attempt to reveal the reflection of environmental influences in the meaning each word bears. For instance, the word "shadow" (sayeh /sɑje/ in Persian) as he puts, seems to have positive implications for Iranians, since Iran is a sunny country, while in Britain people may view this negatively, as the number of sunny days in Britain is few. Therefore, "shadow" in Persian implies a sense of being under the protection and support of someone, while in English it is the sign of fear, darkness and thus, is ominous. With examples as such the author tries to describe the connection of the power of mind in creating meaning with the inspiration it receives from the surrounding environment.

Another study in the same vein was conducted by Amoozadeh and Tavangar (2005) in which the researchers concluded that Persian language, similar to other Indo-European languages, lacks "green grammar". However, using green metaphors in literature and discourses more than before would raise the public's attention on environmental issues, and further would help the emergence of new insights.

Veisi (2007) believes people's view towards natural elements (water, wind, and fire) depends on their interaction with their surrounding nature throughout history. That is why languages vary in the way they treat natural environment. For instance, water is a crucial element in Persian culture since the civilization has been founded in a dry region. Therefore, a considerable proportion of Persian lexicon contains "water" (ab /ɑb/ in Persian); Aban /ɑbɑn/: the guardian angel of water, ab-bakhsh /ɑb-bæxʃ/: a person whose job is distributing water among farmers. "Fire" (atash /ɑtæʃ/ in Persian) was also an important power of nature in old Persia and it was the symbol of cleanliness and innocence. Unfortunately, the author fails to give a proper explanation on the interaction of mind, language and nature in creating new meanings through combining these three elements with other words or affixes. It seems that the whole work is just a brief historical description of some words whose main/marginal components include water, wind or fire.

The significance of "water", which is the symbol of innocence, purity and honesty, has been emphasized in many classic and modern poetries. For instance, Rezaee (2007) believes Sohrab Sepehri's (1928-1980) poem, "The Sound of Water's Foot-step", exhibits the poet's worldview through language and that his way of thinking, inspired by water in this piece of language, is far too different from the mainstream mindset of his time. In fact, Sepehri's poem is an example of positive discourse as the poem tries to elaborate the role of water as well as the whole of nature not only to humans, but also to other living creatures. He uses elements of nature as poetic metaphors of Islamic rituals and symbols and through this he intends to convey this message that life is intertwined with nature and that nature

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² Since this paper is about Iranian linguistics, almost all papers and books we cite here are originally written in Persian. Therefore, the English translation of the citations are listed in the bibliography. They are also available in the original language, i.e. Persian, to be easily accessible to Persian-speaking readers who are curious to refer to the original work.

deserves the same respect as humans do: "a God […] among these scented stocks", "my Kabaa is near some water", "our garden was on the shadow side of wisdom".

Sepehri is considered an environmentalist poet just as writers such as Mahmoud Dowlatabadi (1940-) and Bozorg Alavi (1904-1997) are considered so, as Rakei and Naeimi (2016) conclude in their paper titled "Metaphor and Ecocriticism: Case Study of two Stories 'Gilemard' and 'Az Kham-e Chambar'". In this study, the authors investigate one of Alavi's and Dowlatabadi's stories ("Az Kham-e Chambar" by Dowlatabadi and "Gilemard" by Alavi) in terms of the metaphors they contain and believe that the writers intentionally used several metaphorical expressions to compare human's power with that of nature to draw the reader's attention to their natural environment: STORM IS A HUMAN BEING, WATER IS A BEAST (from "Gilemard"); and PEACE IS DUST, SKY IS A LIVING CREATURE, and NIGHT IS A BEAST (from "Az Kham-e Chambar"). They also concluded that the metaphor NATURE IS MOTHER is emerging in Iranian literature and discourse.

The linkage of Persian language diversity and climate variation in Iran was the theme of a paper by Ghatreh et al. (2015). The authors selected two languages; one from northern Iran (i.e. Gilaki) which enjoys the highest rainfall year-round and a central plateau language (i.e. Semnani and its variations) to demonstrate the impact of climate diversity on language variation. They compared their findings with those of Nettle (1996) who concluded that language diversity in Africa (the area he conducted his research on) depends on the amount of rain each area receives, meaning that the number of languages spoken in a specific area is directly dependent to the amount of rain that area gets during the year. He believes that rain is essential for the survival of local communities as it empowers them to grow their own food, and as a result, they do not need to interact with nearby communities for food trade. Ghatreh et al. questioned and further scrutinized Nettle's finding by presenting a hugely diverse language in a dry region with very low rainfall. They suggested that although water is a crucial factor for survival of any communities, lack of rainfall cannot be seen as a hindrance to diversification of a language. Communities will grow self-sufficient as far as they can produce their own food, and therefore, diverse clusters of a given language develop over the course of time as the interactions between those clusters decline.

Talebi-Dastenaei (2015) studied anger metaphors in different cultures and languages and focused on anger metaphors in Persian languages; where she introduced ecometaphor, which is a new approach that can be the bridge between the conceptual metaphors and ecology and how they can be connected to each other.

Other research efforts of morphological type have focused on lexical diversity of date farming, naming, and date trees in Kerman (Salami, 2004), in Katichi dialect in Sistan (Re'isi, 2013); farming and gardening lexicon in Ghomoshe dialect in Shahreza (Ra'ee, 2009); fishing lexicon in Booshehr (Hajiani, 2007), lexical characteristics of birds and aquatic species in Gilan (Nasiripur, 2009); and husbandry lexicon in Genaveh (Jalalpur, 2013).

2.2. Discourse Studies

While many scholars have tried to present ecologically-oriented discourse analyses in the realm of advertising, economics, environmentalism, natural resources, energy, animals, ecotourism, the concept of 'nature', climate change and sustainability (Gavriely-Nuri, 2012), very few Iranian studies were identified as being ecological discourse analysis in character.

Ahmadipur (2011) attempted to define theoretical Persian ecolinguistics and its strong relationship to sociolinguistics and the discourse of political power; she then suggests that environmental discourse has great potential to promote language planning. She can be named the pioneer of this line of research but her works never continued in this line, so that nothing much is known about the grounds of her initial ideas. However, after the publication of her paper, a few master's theses were conducted, seemingly to follow her work.

In her thesis, Hoseinzadeh (2009) studied 25 ecology-related newspaper articles from a critical discourse point of view, revealing the shortcomings of journalistic writing style in terms of lexical as well as grammatical usage in addressing environmental issues in Iran. As a result of this deficit, environment-centered thought has not yet been established in this country to contribute to the resolution of numerous environmental problems. The author believes that transitive and passive structures attempt to marginalize the existing problems and help individuals evade their responsibilities with regard to the natural resources that serve them.

A similar study by Ghiasian and Shirini (2016) focused on the relationship between human and animals to demonstrate the "anthropocentrism" in Persian when dealing with ecology.

3. Final Remarks

It is roughly 20 years that Iranian linguists have shown interest in ecology-related linguistic topics, however not necessarily within the globally known substrate of ecolinguistics. Other than the few studies mentioned here, nothing much has been done within the area of ecolinguistics and those few works presented here, unfortunately, do not pursue a clear line of research. Rather, they are all some scattered, individual, small-scale, and brief studies that do not touch the depth of the concept. It seems that ecolinguistics in Iran tends to pursue the trend in which the direct interaction of language-society-environment is sought. Nevertheless, toponymy has a huge potential for ecolinguistic studies, as Iran is a diverse country in terms of geography, culture, and language. This realm is open to researchers to produce seminal academic research in order to document and preserve place names, which are the country's national heritage. Besides, a proper ecolinguistic investigation of the interactions between the cognitive structures shared by communities, the stories we live by, and the linguistic representation of those stories (Stibbe, 2015) requires the

contributions from toponymy studies.

If we consider ecolinguistics as a triangle, then Stibbe's (2015) components of cognitive structures, shared experiences, and language patterns form the vertices of that triangle. In other words, the interaction of those elements is all ecolinguistics is about, as we saw in the previous sections; yet Iranian studies still have a long way to go to establish a proper ecolinguistic ternary. Considering the current catastrophic situation of habitats and natural resources, as well as endangered species and many other environmental issues, it is time for scholars in general, and linguists in particular, to raise public awareness on the importance of the natural environment and call for serious, systematic attention from the government, decision makers, and politicians. After all, we need to reconcile with Mother Nature if we want to survive. In other words, all we need now is to stop the destructive stories that have created patterns in our mind and cognition, as a result of which we see the world as a hierarchal system and human beings are positioned at the top of the hierarchy; all other living creatures as well as natural resources are secondary in importance and are there to serve us. With such a worldview we entitle ourselves to deforest green areas to build a landfill site for hardly-recyclable garbage and report it as "one of the services the government has provided for citizens, because they care about their citizens' health and wellbeing" while ironically, the living plants and trees do the same job. To build new stories to live by we need to understand the destructive stories behind our current decisions and actions, and to replace them with new, more positive, ones. And this is exactly where positive discourse analysis can play a significant role; that is, in searching for new stories to live by. Positive discourse analysis offers another important line of research with a huge potential within the realm of ecolinguistic studies, by investigating the different Persian-speaking sources – from classical and modern poetry to local/traditional Persian cultures – to look for and reveal positive new stories to live by.

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