

Ecolinguistics in an International Context: an Interview with Arran Stubbe

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Introduction

Recently there has been a growing interest in the study of ecolinguistic issues in China, and Chinese scholars approach the field from many different perspectives, including the ecology of language, ecological analysis of discourse, and eco-translation studies. As expected, the newly-published book *Ecolinguistics: language, ecology and the stories we live by* (Routledge, 2015) by Arran Stubbe is becoming popular in China and its Chinese translation is to be published by Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press in Beijing later in the year. Along with this encouraging moment, an ecology-centred journal in China, the *Journal of Poyang Lake*, is to have a Special Column in a forthcoming issue featuring Arran's research on ecolinguistics.

I (Guowen Huang) am directing the project which is translating Arran's book and producing the special column for the *Journal of Poyang Lake*. I am Director of the Centre for Ecolinguistics at South China Agricultural University (SCAU), China, as well as Dean of the College of Foreign Studies at SCAU. I have previously conducted a significant amount of research on Systemic Functional Linguistics and have been teaching and researching ecolinguistics from the perspective of ecological analysis of discourse. I am organizing the first symposium on ecolinguistics in China, to be held during Nov. 25-27, 2016 at SCAU in Guangzhou, which has attracted more than 200 abstracts/participants, including more than 30 ecolinguistic scholars from outside China.

This paper consists of an interview with Arran Stubbe. The interview questions and answers are concerned with issues of ecolinguistics in general and ecolinguistic studies in an international context. Arran is a reader in Ecological Linguistics at the

University of Gloucestershire, U.K., author of *Ecolinguistics: language, ecology and the stories we live by* (Routledge, 2015), *Animals Erased: discourse, ecology and reconnection with nature* (Wesleyan University Press, 2012) and editor of *The Handbook of Sustainability Literacy* (Green Books, 2009). He has a background both in linguistics and human ecology, and teaches a range of courses including ecolinguistics, ecocriticism, ethics and language, communication for leadership, discourse analysis and language and identity.

The Interview

Guowen: Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed.

Arran: Thank you, I was pleased to be asked. I'd also like to thank you for the excellent work that you are doing in bringing Ecolinguistics to China, and your previous work on Systemic Functional Linguistics. I think you are playing a valuable role in furthering ecolinguistics as an international discipline capable of addressing some of the challenges that humanity is facing.

Guowen: Yes, like you I recognize the importance of Ecolinguistics and am doing what I can to promote it.

Guowen: To start the questions, I understand that you received degrees from different universities in human ecology, linguistics, speech and natural language processing and computer systems engineering. And I assume that this educational background helps you greatly in dealing with ecolinguistic issues. But there are not many people in the field who have been lucky enough to have knowledge and research methodology in these areas. So my question is: How can a person who has only been trained in linguistics do well in ecolinguistic studies?

Arran: It is a problem because our educational institutions are so segregated into separate disciplines. I think that ecolinguists have an important role to play in providing a bridge between specialists in language and specialists in ecology. I have given guest talks for environmental scientists, veterinary scientists, ecologists, and animal studies specialists where I've described the importance of the linguistic dimension in their work and offered a set of tools that they can use for analyzing language. I have also given guest talks to linguists and specialists from media studies, art, cultural studies and literature where I've focused on the ecological issues that

are facing humanity and how critical analysis of words and images can help address these issues.

I'm careful with the kind of language that I use myself; for example when I'm addressing an audience of non-linguists I will talk about the 'stories we live by' rather than 'hegemonic discourses'. And when I'm with linguists I'll talk about the 'natural systems that we depend on for our survival' rather than 'ecosystem service providers'. In my *Ecolinguistics* book I tried to keep a balance so that it could be engaging for both ecologists and linguists without either group feeling patronized.

In general there is a big problem since university departments specialize separately in ecology, linguistics, sociology or psychology, while the issues we face today have intertwined psychological, social, linguistic and ecological dimensions. Ecolinguists need to study different areas of life ourselves and use our multidisciplinary perspective to introduce others to more integrative ways of analyzing the world.

Guowen: Talking of integration, from your writings I can see that you accept theoretical assumptions from cognitive linguistics, systemic functional linguistics, critical discourse analysis and other approaches to the study of social sciences in general and language studies in particular. Does that mean that you believe that one cannot do ecolinguistics well within a single theoretical framework? Do you prefer an integrative approach? Do you think ecolinguistics should be studied by drawing together different theoretical assumptions and methodologies?

Arran: I think that language is complex and multifaceted and there are researchers who have focused on particular areas for in-depth study. There are detailed theories and studies of metaphor, framing, evaluation, modality, conversational moves, rhetoric, and grammar to name just a few. Each can be useful depending on what data is being examined, and for what purpose, and sometimes it is useful to combine compatible theories.

What I try to do is to bring together the most useful approaches into a practical toolkit that is based on a consistent theoretical perspective. So in the *Ecolinguistics* book, the framework is based on *stories*, which exist in the minds of individuals (i.e., they are cognitive structures). They are also shared across a society where they become *stories we live by* (i.e., social cognition). The stories have a linguistic manifestation in particular patterns of linguistic choices (i.e., discourses). And most importantly they have an impact on how we treat the world. In a few words I'd say the theory is 'Stories influence how we think, talk and act, and to address ecological issues we need to change the stories we live by'. I've adapted theories of identity, appraisal, facticity, modality and erasure to fit within this general framework, and in the future I can see myself incorporating other ways of analyzing language, e.g.,

narrative analysis, into the framework.

So overall I would say that ecolinguistics can draw from the most useful linguistic theories and bring them together, adapting them if necessary, to form both a theoretically consistent framework and practically effective tools. For a single study, a single framework like Systemic Functional Grammar could be usefully and appropriately applied, but I'd like to see ecolinguistics in general draw from the most useful and detailed studies of all aspects of language.

Guowen: Although many ecolinguists understand that it is not only humans whose wellbeing and lives are being threatened in huge numbers, but also animals, who are kept in inhumane conditions and slaughtered in their billions, do you think it is equally important to draw people's attention to improving the lives of humans and animals or one is more important than the other?

Arran: Absolutely. My own personal ecological philosophy (ecosophy) is that human wellbeing is an ethical imperative. The aim is to improve the wellbeing of humans and other living beings in ways that protect the ecological systems we all depend on. From a pragmatic perspective, policies which harm humans are unlikely to be accepted anyway, so the most effective path is one which benefits people, other species, and the systems that life depends on. I do recognize, however, that there are other ecological philosophies. For some, only human interests matter and the environment is important only for supplying human resources and absorbing waste. For others, the damage and suffering that humans have inflicted on each other and other creatures is so devastating that it would be best to work towards a world without us. I think that each ecolinguist needs to approach their study using their own individual ecosophy to judge the stories we live by against.

Guowen: Do you think that ecolinguistics is becoming better recognized in mainstream linguistics?

Arran: In 2004 when I started the *Ecolinguistics Association* (called the 'Centre for Language and Ecology' back then) there were five members including me. I've just checked and now we have 420 members from countries across the world. It's still not many but is increasing all the time. A few years ago I was invited to write a chapter on ecolinguistics for the *Blackwell Handbook of Language and Globalization*, then Bloomsbury's *Contemporary Critical Discourse Studies*, then *The International Encyclopedia of Language and Social Interaction* and then the *Routledge Handbook of Critical Discourse Analysis*. Also the journal *Critical Discourse Studies* invited me to write a special feature on Ecolinguistics. These are all very much mainstream

publications. And interestingly the main keynote presentation from Isabela and Norman Fairclough at the CADAAD conference last month was on fracking. I can see a growing acknowledgment within mainstream linguistics that ecological issues are both important for the future of life on Earth and have a linguistic dimension that can be analysed. I would hope that a few years later it will no longer be necessary to have a subdiscipline of 'ecolinguistics' at all because all mainstream linguists will view humans as embedded in both societies and the larger natural world.

Guowen: I have read your paper (co-authored with Richard Alexander, 2014). But I still want to ask these two questions: What are the main differences between Critical Discourse Analysis and ecological discourse analysis? And what is the role of positive discourse analysis in ecolinguistics?

Arran: Critical Discourse Analysis has tended to focus on the oppression of one group of humans by another group of humans. By analyzing texts, analysts hope to reveal the linguistic mechanisms of oppression so that they can be resisted by the oppressed group. Ecolinguistics goes further and examines relationships not only among groups of humans but also between humans and the more-than-human world. It therefore focuses on a wider range of 'oppressed' groups, including humans, animals, future generations of humans and animals, plants, forests and the larger ecological systems that all life depends on for survival. In ecolinguistics, ideologies are judged not just by social criteria but by ecological criteria (an ecosophy).

Part of the role of ecolinguistics is resisting the stories that underpin an unequal and ecologically destructive society, but an equally important part is the search for new stories to live by. Positive discourse analysis involves looking at cultures around the world to search for positive forms of language that encourage respect and care for the natural world.

Guowen: Can you give some examples of Positive Discourse Analysis to illustrate this?

Arran: While I was working in Japan I noticed that the traditional Japanese culture has ideas about human relationships with the nature that could be very helpful in dealing with the cotemporary alienation and separation from the natural world. I analyzed haiku poetry to discover the linguistic techniques which communicated very different stories from western environmentalism or nature documentaries. For example, there were ways of using language in Haiku which give attention and care to ordinary nature - a frog or a flower by the side of the road. This is quite different from environmentalism which sees the world in terms of resources for human

exploitation, or from nature documentaries which praise only huge dramatic aspects of nature that people are unlikely to come across in their everyday lives. I also analyzed Japanese animation, revealing the stories it tells subtly through the use of language and images, and pointed out how they could be useful in environmental education.

Since then I've analyzed nature writing in the UK (the New Nature Writing genre), and Native American discourses, always looking for positive ways of talking about the world that provide new stories to live by. A well-known example is the following, which is attributed to Chief Seattle:

Humankind has not woven the web of life. We are but one thread within it. Whatever we do to the web, we do to ourselves. All things are bound together. All things connect.

This metaphor conveys the story that humans are part of nature and dependent on it for survival, which is an important alternative story for a culture which sees nature as a machine or resource that is separate from humans.

Something else I've done which is completely different is analyzing positive economic discourses, like Gross National Happiness in Bhutan or the discourse of the New Economics Foundation. I'm looking for alternatives to the most common and dangerous story of all, that economic growth is the primary goal of society. Through the research I'm discovering useful ways of using language that tell different stories about the goal of society. It's the most interesting and rewarding kind of research to do or to read – I wish there was more of it!

Guowen: In your 2015 book (*Ecolinguistics: language, ecology and the stories we live by*), you outlined and illustrated the concept of ecosophy and you stated that different ecolinguists will have their own ecosophies that they use for analysing stories and language. How can ecolinguists from different places of the world with different ideologies share the general assumptions and principles in researching ecolinguistic issues?

Arran: In my vision of ecolinguistics, ecolinguists use linguistic analysis to reveal dominant stories, judge those stories according to their own ecosophy, and contribute to the search for new stories to live by. Clearly researchers in different parts of the world (or in the same part!) have different ecosophies, but all are involved in the same ecolinguistic endeavor of judging discourses against ecological principles. There is no guarantee that a particular ecosophy will be useful, but the reason I promote ecolinguistics is that I think we are more likely to protect the ecological systems that life depends on *if we consider them in our analysis*.

Guowen: About 18 years ago, Alwin Fill (1998) identified two approaches to the study of ecolinguistics (that is, the Haugen approach and the Halliday approach). What current approaches to ecolinguistics would you say there are?

Arran: I would say that there are a growing number of forms of academic enquiry that have labelled themselves 'ecolinguistics', but that they are sometimes entirely different rather than being 'approaches' to the same thing. Some are concerned primarily with preserving rare languages (on the analogy that rare languages are like rare species); some are concerned with improving language teaching (on the analogy that the linguistic environment of learners is like a natural environment). Then there are approaches which follow Halliday and are concerned with the ecological systems that life depends on, and the impact that language has on those systems. My approach clearly follows Halliday. There *have* been attempts to show some kind of commonality between different forms of ecolinguistics; for example, that saving rare languages can benefit biodiversity because of the ecological knowledge embedded in the languages. But for me, if a study is just about language learning, language contact or saving a particular language, and does not mention the more-than-human world at all then it's a work of sociolinguistics rather than ecolinguistics.

Guowen: What then would you say that the essence of 'ecolinguistics' is?

Arran: For me the central insight of ecolinguistics is that humans live not only within societies but also within the larger ecosystems that are necessary for their existence. I'd say that in the early days, Chomskyan linguistics focused on language in brain but overlooked the fact that humans exist within societies. Sociolinguistics came along and recognized the social embedding of humans, but overlooked the ecological embedding of societies. Ecolinguistics recognizes that human societies are part of wider ecosystems and shows the impact that language can have those ecosystems, through its influence on human behavior. This is important since our survival depends on how we treat the ecosystems we are part of. It is also more accurate to consider humans as part of the systems which sustain our lives on a minute-by-minute basis rather than artificially trying to consider humans in isolation. Ecolinguistics has the potential to draw attention to this vital ecological embedding in the same way that ecopsychology, ecocriticism, environmental communication and ecofeminism have in other areas.

Guowen: I understand that your current direction is towards applying ecolinguistics beyond the academic world in ways that engage directly with school teachers,

children, scientists and citizens. Can you tell us what you have done (or have been doing) in that direction?

Arran: That's essential, since for me the key aim of ecolinguistics is to make a direct difference to the world rather than just sharing academic ideas with other academics. This is something that I want to do more of in the future, but I have done some things already.

Firstly, as I mentioned, I've given talks to environmental scientists, veterinary scientists, and ecologists on using language in ways that can encourage people to respect and care for the natural world. More directly, I took part in a UNEP working group on ecosystem assessments. I've criticized the language of ecosystem assessments in the past for treating the natural world as a stock of resources rather than finding any value in it. So I was pleased to be in a position where I could work directly with the writers of the reports to influence the discourse (or at least to try).

Secondly there's the practical training in communication for leadership that I offer my students, where I work closely with them on expressing an ethical vision and communicating in ways which challenge the stories we live by and open up paths to new stories. I gave a talk to staff in an educational company recently, using ecolinguistics to help them reflect on the direction and communication strategy of their company. It's worth quoting from feedback they gave afterwards:

The half-day workshop for our organisation was based on Dr Stibbe's work and research on ecolinguistics. The presentation was accessible, positive and stimulating. The impact on staff was predominantly a significant change in attitude towards the use of language as well as gaining a deeper insight into how any narrative includes a world of embedded meaning. The research that Dr Stibbe has done over the years, so appropriately captured in his notion 'the stories we live by', represents a new perspective on language. Since the workshop with Dr Stibbe our communications team, and those involved in the outward facing roles in the particular, have actively applied a more conscious approach to the creation of authentic narratives. In our line of work communication, accuracy and transparency is vital. For that reason alone, I am truly grateful to Dr Stibbe for sharing the research and good practice with our organisation.

I've also been working on a European Union project which is creating materials for teachers to use across Europe to integrate education for sustainability into their classes. This is exciting because the materials I'm producing introduce students and teachers to ecolinguistics but do it through a personal narrative of me running in the countryside through all weathers and protecting local green areas from development. In this I'm using ecolinguistics to help shape how I'm writing about the natural world

(e.g., making ordinary nature vivid through words and photographs), while at the same time introducing students to the principles of ecolinguistics.

Guowen: As your book *Ecolinguistics: language, ecology and the stories we live by* is translated into Chinese and being published in China, what would you like to say to the Chinese readers of ecolinguistics?

Arran: I would say that ecological issues in China are of great importance, both within the country and for the world. China has already brought significant numbers of people out of poverty and there are many more to go. However, at the same time the country has suffered from pollution and the effects of climate change due to rapid industrialization. China will need to find development pathways that are decidedly different from the polluting, exploitative and ultimately unsustainable pathways of western industrial countries. I can see there is a real desire to do that in China, and everything depends on the stories that underpin the society. Ecolinguistics, as a way of examining the stories we live by and contributing to new stories to live by, has the potential to make a difference. What is particularly exciting about ecolinguistics in China is that traditional Chinese culture (e.g., Taoism, Chan Buddhism and Confucianism) can be a source for new stories to live by. I'd strongly encourage Chinese ecolinguists to 'dig where they stand' and revive traditional ways of thinking and talking about the natural world, adapting them to fit the current conditions of the world we face.

Guowen: Can you give some examples of traditional Chinese ideas that could be useful?

Arran: Well, there's the principle of *Wu Wei* (effortless action) in Taoism that is so beautifully explained by Zhuangzi; the cycles and balance of elements; the Shan Shui writers and painters; Mengzi's texts on Confucianism; and some wonderful ideas (and ways of expression) in the *Dao De Jing*. I came across many inspiring texts when I was doing my PhD, which explored metaphors of health and illness in western and Chinese culture. Back then I contrasted western metaphors of fighting an illness with Chinese metaphors of restoring balance and harmony, something which is relevant to ecological issues too.

Guowen: Can you speak Chinese?

Arran: No, unfortunately. I worked with translations and explanations from native speakers, although I later learned to speak Japanese and have done research into

Japanese ways of representing the natural world.

Guowen: About 12 years ago, you started the *Centre for Language and Ecology*, which later became the *Ecolinguistics Association*. How are you going to strengthen this association in terms of the infrastructure of ecolinguistic studies worldwide? Will the association become an organization in the near future, whose committee will play the role of organizing international conferences and deal with other relevant issues?

Arran: The Ecolinguistics Association provides an online journal, *Language & Ecology*, an ecolinguistics bibliography, and a mailing list for announcements and queries about ecolinguistics. It's free and run by volunteers. The number of members has increased steadily over the years and has reached 420. Recently we've seen an increase in the number of articles submitted to the journal, which is undoubtedly due to the editor Amy Free, who is doing a wonderful job. I'm hoping that in the future there will be more high quality articles, and hopefully move to a fully peer-reviewed and listed journal.

Something we started recently was Ecolinguistics Circles – small local groups of researchers and students holding meetings to discuss ecolinguistics and having their own blogs to share ideas. I'm hoping that more groups will be formed and share their blogs with the Association. At present, international conferences are organized by the university where they are being held, and advertised on the Ecolinguistics Association website. In time as the membership increases and there are more volunteers to contribute to the association we may try to play a more prominent role, but I see this as incremental rather than a sudden jump. In the meantime if anyone else wants to set up organizations which can contribute to promoting ecolinguistics internationally then the Association will gladly cooperate and share resources. I'm also hoping that the Association will be a partner in making an online ecolinguistics course with videos illustrating all the main aspects of ecolinguistics.

Guowen: Any final thoughts?

Arran: I'd just like to wish you success with your efforts in bringing Ecolinguistics to China, and hope that others reading this in other parts of the world can do something similar. Thank you for such interesting and thought-provoking questions!

Guowen: Many thanks.