



Article

Econarratology and ecolinguistics: An auspicious disciplinary contact zone

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Abstract

Econarratology and ecolinguistics are two emerging fields that deal with the nexus between human language and the environment. Both analyse how human–ecology relations and the non-human world are represented in textual patterns. Ecolinguists employ discourse analysis and increasingly draw on narratological tools. They expose socially and ecologically harmful narratives to counter them with more life-sustaining alternatives. Econarratologists, in turn, investigate narrative structures as they intersect with the representation of the environment and the more-than-human world. Despite this shared interest, there is a curious absence of sustained interaction between the two fields. This partly goes back to the disciplines’ different genealogies in the social sciences and humanities, respectively. However, we believe that the fields can cross-pollinate given their shared ecocritical goals. Our article focuses primarily on two contemporary representatives in ecolinguistics and econarratology, Arran Stibbe and Erin James, whose voices allow us to sketch convergences between the two fields. By tracing methodological similarities and differences, we explore how the two disciplines can benefit from systematic collaboration. Through illuminating typical concepts that animate both fields — such as metaphor, narrative, disnarration/erasure — we explore econarratology and ecolinguistics as reciprocal tools for ecocritical text analysis. Harnessing the synergy of these two methodologies promises to contribute to environmental communication and advocacy.

Keywords: econarratology; ecolinguistics; interdisciplinary text analysis; study of methodologies; narratives; environmental communication

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1. Introduction

Econarratology and ecolinguistics are two emerging fields that deal with the nexus between human language and the environment. Both pursue the analysis of how ecological concerns, human–ecology relations, and the non-human world are represented in textual patterns. Econarratology and ecolinguistics have different genealogies: Econarratology is a relatively young and homogeneous field that applies narrative theory to ecocriticism, while ecolinguistics constitutes a heterogeneous field of linguistics, born in the 1970s, that is concerned with discourse analysis.

As two environmental humanists, one with a background in literature and the other in cultural geography and linguistics, our common interest is the role of language in representing the relationship between humans and the more-than-human world. In numerous conversations, we realised that econarratology and ecolinguistics, despite their different genealogies, actually converge on ecocritical goals. Both disciplines¹ analyse narrative structures and the information these reveal about the environment, including the non-human world. They further share an attention to how these narrative structures influence people's attitudes towards the ecological environment. Investigating recent scholarship revealed that both disciplines also share a number of objects of study and methodological tools. Despite these convergences, we found a curious absence of sustained interaction between the two fields. Why is that? Is there a (potential) love story or a sibling rivalry here? And, importantly, how could both fields benefit from talking to each other in a systematic way?

We argue that econarratology and ecolinguistics have great potential to complement each other. Being aware of the two disciplines' genealogical paths, we resist simplistic comparison. Neither do we intend to paint an exhaustive image, acknowledging their internal heterogeneity. By exploring methodological commonalities and productive tensions, our goal is rather to diagnose where fruitful interactions can develop, and why these matter.

In the following, we first sketch the origins of each discipline and interrogate them with regard to key methodological questions, such as their objects of study, goals, and fields of application. By illuminating some of the typical concepts that animate both disciplines, we show the ways in which econarratology and ecolinguistics can provide complementary tools for ecocritical text analysis. By way of closing, we discuss the applied potential for ecological awareness building. An integrated methodology might just become a novel instrument in the toolbox of ecologically concerned scholars. We believe that such a methodology will elevate the power of stories in times of profound need for orientation and action.

¹ We are aware that ecolinguistics and econarratology are subdisciplines, which is an integral part of our genealogical sketch. For the sake of simplicity, we employ the term “discipline”.

2. Genealogical sketches of the two disciplines

2.1. *Ecolinguistics*

Since the 1970s, several branches of ecolinguistics have developed: a theoretical branch (ontological and epistemological reflections), an ecocritical branch, and an applied activist branch (cf. Ha et al., 2024). Fields of application range from language contact, language acquisition, language policies, multilingualism and communicative practices to the impact of language on the environment (Poole, 2025, pp. 7–8; Steffensen, 2024, p. 521). Contemporary ecolinguistics emphasises discourse analytic approaches that appraise the representation of ecological issues. Scholarship delves into discourses “from consumerism to nature poetry” (Stibbe, 2014, p. 117) as they appear in spheres as diverse as (social) media, political agendas, or animal industry textbooks (cf. Poole, 2025; Stibbe, 2021).

The field diversified into distinct branches in the 1990s through several “ecolinguistic turns” (Zhou, 2022, p. 465). A first influential branch is called the ecology of language and uses the metaphor of “environment” to elucidate how languages are embedded within their own linguistic and social contexts. US linguist Einar Haugen (1972) had evoked the concept of “ecology of language” in 1972, meaning “the study of the interactions between any given language and its environment” (p. 325). Importantly, the ecology of language is embedded in sociolinguistics. French linguists Marcellesi in 1975 and later Hagège in 1985 established the term “écolinguistique” to mean relations between any phenomena of the physical environment and the ecology of languages (cf. Goatly, 2018, p. 227; Penz & Fill, 2022, p. 234).

In his foundational 1990 essay, “New Ways of Meaning: A Challenge to Applied Linguistics”, applied linguist Michael Halliday interprets ecology of language new and differently, a development Zhou (2022) calls a “new ecolinguistic paradigm” (p. 472). Manifesting contemporary ecolinguistics, this new strand goes beyond the embeddedness of language in its environment to examine the impact of language — any kind of discourse — on real-life environmental problems. Halliday’s (1990) essay pioneered an understanding of how language mediates framings such as growthism and neoliberalism. This is the strand of ecolinguistics we apply here.

Arran Stibbe, influential British ecolinguist onto whom we later focus, follows in Halliday’s footsteps. With his textbook *Ecolinguistics: Language, Ecology and the Stories We Live By* (2021), he provides a didactic framework that foregrounds criticism of destructive discourses and offers tools for eco-positive interventions. Other ecolinguistics practitioners such as Peter Mühlhäusler or Richard Alexander spotlight environmental discourses specifically (Penz & Fill, 2022; Steffensen, 2025). In a similar vein, applied linguist Hermine Penz employs ecocritical discourse analysis to find out how climate communication strategies can become more effective (Penz, 2022). Complementing these applied analytic approaches, other scholars develop the theoretical groundwork, such as a Danish group of ecolinguists around Stephen John Cowley and Sune Vork Steffensen, and German scholar

Martin Döring.

Ecolinguistics diversified not only over time but also regionally. Several regional nodes evolved beyond the European and North American contexts. In China, scholars like Changchen Ha and Guowen Huang at the South China Agricultural University in Guangzhou established a cluster through collaboration with Arran Stibbe. They stress ecolinguistics's "social accountability" to encourage people to act responsibly towards the environment (Ha, 2023, p. 231). While their methodologies show filiation with their European counterparts, they also align with regional philosophical traditions. For example, the harmonious discourse analysis (HDA) matches Taoist and Buddhist outlooks on striving towards the "harmonious development of the entire ecosystem" (Ha et al., 2024; Penz & Fill, 2022). Two representatives of ecolinguistics in the Latin American context are Hildo Honório Do Couto (Brazil) and Diego Luis Forte (Argentina). In Brazil, ecolinguistics is well established in several universities, having emerged from their own local tradition of ecosystemic linguistics (Do Couto et al., 2021). Forte (2024) traces how ecolinguistics in Latin America struggled to emancipate as a distinct discipline due to a Eurocentric orientation and anthropocentric environmental theories (p. 330).

Contemporary ecolinguistics has become an international movement across continents that advanced native languages into legitimate research objects (Stibbe, 2021). This internationalisation is reflected in the International Ecolinguistics Association (IEA), which organises biennial conferences all around the world and publishes the *Language and Ecology* journal (International Ecolinguistics Association, n.d.).²

2.2. Econarratology

Econarratology is younger than ecolinguistics and arguably more homogeneous. It received its name in 2015 when Erin James christened it out of frustration with ecocriticism's inability to marry narrative theory with the representation of the environment in postcolonial literature. Ecocriticism is thus a key parent discourse and contributes a long interdisciplinary history to the recent econarratological offshoot. Other important impulses for econarratology come from new materialism and the nonhuman turn (cf. Grusin, 2015), which foregrounds the agency of nonhuman entities. Some formally minded scholars see ecocriticism as overly concerned with content and therefore support econarratology as a structure-sensitive complement. James (2021) captures this lacuna when she calls for an "Anthropocene narrative theory" (p. 157).

We can also approach the gap from the other disciplinary shore and ask why narratology has not taken up environmental content earlier. Marco Caracciolo, like James, a scholar at the forefront of econarratology, explains the "tardiness" to embrace ecological questions by pointing to two aspects: narratology's "anthropomorphic bias" and its focus on "human interactions" (Wang & Caracciolo, 2002, p. 5). Another factor for narratology's

² For a comprehensive tribute to recent ecolinguistics scholarship, see also Poole (2025).

long ignorance of ecocritical concerns lies in its disciplinary pedigree: narratology received founding impulses from structuralism and thus inherited a programmatic indifference towards contextual embeddedness of texts. In this sense, econarratology can be understood as “part of a larger wave of ‘contextualist’ narratological” work keen on angles such as “gender, race, postcolonial relations, and [...] environmental threats” (p. 5). Similarly, Markku Lehtimäki (2013) asserts that “narratology has [...] become a context-oriented, functional [...] mode of inquiry” (p. 119).

Once contexts, and *culture-specific* contexts, have entered the econarratological vision, the step to embracing comparisons is close. In their collection *Environment and Narrative in Vietnam*, Ursula Heise and Chi Pham (2024) set out to understand “how divergent ontologies of nature, as articulated by different cultural groups, might be mediated” (p. 17). Heise and Pham’s volume embraces materials outside the literary realm: Films as well as fictional and non-fictional texts from and about Vietnam take centre stage. Despite, or precisely because of, this diversity of media, there is no common methodology to the volume’s case studies. In the wake of Marie-Laure Ryan’s transmedial narratology (2016), the next frontier might thus be to develop a transmedial *econarratology*; a project begun by Joseph Boisvere (2025).

In her afterword to Erin James and Eric Morel’s *Environment and Narrative* (2020), Heise exemplifies an increasingly prominent pedagogical and activist impetus. She refers to her classroom discussions on “how environmentalist discourse is underwritten by particular narrative patterns” (p. 203). An expectation to take a normative stance or at least to address the political prowess of narrative, is increasingly palpable not just in literary studies, but in (eco)narratology as well (cf. Lehtimäki, 2013).

For the sake of this article, we focus primarily on two contemporary representatives in ecolinguistics and econarratology. We find these scholars’ work particularly pertinent for the nexus of language and environmental problems. This is not to sideline other representatives but to focus on those whose voices allow us to sketch a convergence between both fields. Our representative of ecolinguistics is Stibbe. He sees ecolinguistics as an applied interdisciplinary methodology that brings “ethics, environment, ecology, economics, and society to bear on the analysis of texts” (2017, p. 507). Notably, all of Stibbe’s recent work entails a normative target (cf. 2014, 2021, 2024, 2026). We refer to Stibbe’s work with regard to two points in time, before and after 2024. We find Stibbe’s earlier work worthy of mention as it provides an excellent didactic framework, which dovetails with our goal of suggesting *applied* forms of interdisciplinary collaboration. One such example is his influential textbook, *Ecolinguistics: Language, Ecology and the Stories We Live By*, in which he tasks scholars with “critiquing forms of language that contribute to ecological destruction” (Stibbe, 2021, p. 1). 2024 saw the publication of *Econarrative: Ethics, Ecology, and the Search for New Narratives to Live By*, which marks a disciplinary turning point in Stibbe’s analysis. We therefore categorise Stibbe’s pre-2024 work as “ecolinguistic” while his latest work represents an interdisciplinary revisioning.

For the field of econarratology, our main point of reference is James. Her work

constitutes an important node in the budding research paradigm, having not just coined the term, but also edited, together with Morel, a first volume on the topic. James (2021) defines econarratology as “a mode of reading that pair[s] ecocriticism’s interest in the relationship between literature and the physical environment with narratology’s focus on [...] literary structures and devices” (p. 151). With this framing, she inscribes econarratology within two parent discourses, ecocriticism and narratology, yoking the thematic interest of the former with the macro-structural knack of the latter. It is noteworthy that James centres postcolonial texts. These invite critical readings of the intersection between ecological questions and sociohistorical circumstances.

3. Answer to key methodological questions

The following section engages Stibbe’s and James’s approaches in a dialogue. It sketches out objects of study, goals of analysis, methodologies, and three cognate concepts in the disciplines’ practices. With the latter, this section also discerns points of convergence that can foster interdisciplinary interaction.

3.1. *Objects of study*

As far as ecolinguistic practices go, the object of study depends on the branch of ecolinguistics. Stibbe (2021) portrays ecolinguistics as suitable for discourses in various forms of expression: spoken and written, literary and non-literary, formal and oral history, visual rhetoric, as well as other forms of representation, including multimodal communication. Stibbe (2024) describes discourse as “the characteristic way that a particular group in society uses language, images, and other forms of representation” as they pertain for example to neoclassical discourses or to New Nature writing (p. 244). Ecolinguistics then enquires how social spheres are produced through words, and how these spheres, in turn, affect our daily lives (p. 9; p. 125). Stibbe’s (2014) fascination then is with the impact that discourses have on how humans interact with each other and their environments (p. 118).

Recent scholarship highlights a range of methodologies. One is dedicated to discourses revolving around climate change, environmental issues, and animal representation, as well as how they appear in political and corporate documents, documentaries, and textbooks. Other scholars embrace stylistics and storytelling, or the analysis of poetry and literary texts (Poole, 2025, p. 10).

That latter school fits well with econarratological analyses as they have largely focused on written literary texts and movies. However, newer econarratological approaches become increasingly interested in texts outside these traditional boundaries, a widening purview that is in line with the transmedial curiosity in postclassical narratology (Ryan & Thon, 2014). Caracciolo (2022) follows this curiosity, calling narrative “a fundamentally transmedial phenomenon” (p. 13). In practical terms, this means that works such as James’s

Storyworld Accord (2015) or Heise and Pham's edited volume *Environment and Narrative in Vietnam* (2024) add nonfiction texts, for instance travel narratives, as legitimate objects of study.

Not surprisingly, the ecological element is a key concern for both ecolinguistics and econarratology. Stibbe (2014) defines ecology literally, namely “as the life-sustaining interactions of organisms (including humans) with other organisms and the natural environment” (p. 118). Within these interactions, language is a primary means. Alexander and Stibbe (2014) identify two general trends: One tradition refers primarily to discourses about explicit ecological issues. The other, inspired by Halliday, widened this narrow thematic definition to include ecological patterns irrespective of content. This implies practicing discourse analysis of any text under the auspices of certain ecological philosophies — values Alexander and Stibbe (2014) call “ecosophies” (p. 1; Stibbe, 2014, p. 121). That way, even ostensibly non-ecological discourses such as neoliberal economic tracts become of interest as they justify ecologically destructive behaviour (Stibbe, 2014).

This shows parallels to the development in ecocriticism and econarratology, as evident in the expansion of the cli-fi label. Caracciolo distinguishes between a narrower (content-oriented) and a wider definition in which formal features are the essential criterion. “Even if a text doesn't name climate change”, Caracciolo states programmatically, “it can still offer important resources for thinking about the present crisis” (Wang & Caracciolo, 2022, p. 4).

“Narrative” constitutes a quintessential concept that shows overlaps as much as divergences between ecolinguistics and econarratology. It is also a methodological tool (see Section 3.3). “Narratives” in ecolinguistics count as cognitive linguistic devices and are used as units of analysis. Speaking of “narrative”, Stibbe means both underlying cognitive structures and the texts through which these structures are conveyed (see Stibbe, 2021, pp. 182–183; 2024, pp. 5–7). Narratives, in the cognitive sense, are the underlying stories (Stibbe, 2024), meaning “discourses, frames, metaphors and, in general, clusters of linguistic features that [...] convey particular worldviews” (Stibbe, 2014). Acknowledging the need for conceptual integrability, Stibbe replaces the expression “stories to live by” with “narratives to live by” in his recent monograph on econarratives.

Reviewing current literature in econarratology, James (2015) defines narrative by highlighting two aspects: first, “the presence of one or more narrators speaking to one or more narratees”, and second, “the representation of a sequence of events, as opposed to one event” (p. 248). According to James, receiving a narrative leads to “experientiality”, meaning readers immerse themselves in mental simulations. Experientiality, in the words of Monika Fludernik (2001), “reflects a cognitive schema of embodiedness that relates to human existence and human concerns” (p. 13). Importantly, James discusses fictional and nonfictional narratives. Hence, it is not the make-believe nature of stories that accounts for their status as narrative, but it is the way they are presented and received. As is apparent from these considerations, ecolinguistics and econarratology employ different, yet overlapping notions of narrative.

3.2. Goal of analysis

The goal of ecolinguistics is both analytic and applied, namely to expose underlying stories that are conducive to ecological destruction and social injustices. Three steps of ecolinguistic analysis are: 1) to understand the stories we live by; 2) to question them; and 3) to ultimately reformulate them according to eco-positive ideals (Stibbe, 2014, p. 117; Stibbe, 2021).

How then does this compare to econarratological approaches? In the most basic terms, econarratologists analyse narrative structures as they intersect with the representation of the environment and the more-than-human world. Not always, but often included in such an analysis, is a curiosity about readers' perceptions and emotions in response to these narrative structures. Some, but certainly not all, econarratologists ultimately hope to provide tools that spark proenvironmental change, to midwife, as Greta Gaard (2020) puts it, an "ecopolitical promise" (p. 227). James belongs into this category, while other scholars are cautious about an outright activist or even optimist angle. Caracciolo, for example, contends that he is "slightly sceptical about arguments that reading cli-fi can directly trigger pro-environmental action", and calls for more empirical ecocriticism (Wang & Caracciolo, 2022, p. 8). We will address the normative stance of both disciplines in Section 4.

Revealing and interpreting implicit structures is a key goal for both disciplines. Thus, Stibbe's (2021) aim to "reveal the *underlying* stories" in texts (p. x, emphasis added) aligns with Heise's assumption that "environmentalist discourse is *underwritten* by particular narrative patterns" (in James & Morel, 2020, p. 203). The goal for Heise, then, is to extract these narrative patterns that can take the shape of story templates, actants, as well as temporal and spatial scales. Aside from literary narratives, she also sees these patterns alive in everyday storytelling (p. 204). James equally recognises the need to study not only what a text says but "the hidden assumptions, attitudes, and affiliations upon which its interpretation by readers relies" (in James & Morel, 2020, p. 160). Therefore, one goal is to identify these underlying assumptions and attitudes.

3.3. Tools and methodologies

A chief tool for ecolinguistics is discourse analysis (DA). Stibbe (2021) uses it to retrieve language patterns and mental models in texts. Variations of DA such as critical, positive, or harmonious DA are used across the discipline (Penz & Fill, 2022, pp. 238–239). Irrespective of the DA subtype, typical units of analysis, Stibbe suggests, include framings, ideologies, metaphors, evaluations, identities, convictions, erasure, salience, and narrative. On a linguistic level, these units manifest in the form of trigger words, appraisal or facticity patterns, or even as traces of obscured information (Stibbe, 2021, pp. 14–18). While the scope of our essay does not allow for laying out all units of analysis, we exemplify here three frequently employed categories, namely framings, evaluations, and identities.

A framing, in Stibbe's (2021) parlance, uses "a package of knowledge about one area

of life (a frame) to structure how another [...] is conceptualised” (p. 223). Frames are clusters of general knowledge common among members of a community, brought to the minds of recipients through trigger words (Stibbe, 2021). Framings can be constructive or destructive. An example of an ecologically *destructive* framing is “NATURE IS A RESOURCE”, as it flattens nature to its utility value (Stibbe, 2021, p. 47).

Evaluation is a story “in people’s minds about whether an area of life is good or bad” (Stibbe, 2021, p. 79). Evaluations work as appraisal patterns in texts to which recipients react. When recurrently used across society, these appraisal patterns can turn into culturally entrenched evaluations (ibid.).

Equally central to ecolinguistic analysis are identities: Language often suggests how someone or something should be, appear, or behave, which Stibbe (2021) exemplifies by pointing to lifestyle magazines. Through valuing status and material wealth, these magazines stimulate consumerist and gender identities. As an example of the latter, consider how the following quote from *Men’s Health* exemplifies the notion that the ideal man is muscular: “Steak is a reliable weapon in the battle to bulk up, with protein and creatine arming your muscular growth” Also note the direct pronominal address in this quote (“your muscular growth”) which reifies identification with the desired gendered body (p. 113).

Other scholars’ analyses are even more detailed than Stibbe’s. Goatly (2018), for example, focuses on grammatical features and lexis to understand how these mediate between humans and “the ‘natural’ world” (p. 227). Specifically, he examines how transitive clauses encode canonical events, empathy hierarchies, and the ratio of nouns (things), verbs (processes), and passive structures.

Unlike Goatly, but similarly to Stibbe, econarratologists tend to focus on high-level patterns. This is not surprising given the disciplinary legacy of looking at storytelling patterns — in fact, structuralist storytelling grammars of folk tales were among the first narratological classics (see Propp, 1928). In their pursuit of applying ecocritical sensitivity to narrative structures, econarratologists often prioritise aspects such as temporality (what happens when and how it is represented), focalisation (who narrates and with what kind of epistemic access), as well as representations of characters’ speech and consciousness. A typical analysis also asks what characters appear in the first place, and how they are (not) embedded in certain environments. Econarratological readings might also question the seemingly easy difference between plot (what happens) and description (representation of scenes and environments). Ecocritical pursuits cast traditional narratological inquiries in a new light when they investigate, for instance, how certain genre conventions, say horror or comedy, square with readerly reactions (Lehtimäki, 2020; Tidwell & Soles, 2021).

Drawing on David Herman, James (2015) has built a whole theory around his concept of the “storyworld”, which she defines as “mental model[s] of context and environment within which a narrative’s characters function and to which readers transport themselves” (p. 252). Importantly, these transportation processes into imagined environments differ from person to person and from culture to culture. Thus, tracing how textual cues evoke

cognitive and affective reactions vis-à-vis the environment is key to James's analyses.

In what follows, we highlight three concepts that have a particularly strong resonance within both ecolinguistics and econarratology: agency/activation, erasure/disnarration, and metaphor. Looking at these terms, we appreciate both the similar interests across disciplines and the promise of collaboration, without denying fruitful differences.

3.4. Three cognate concepts

3.4.1. Agency / activation

A notoriously slippery term to define, "agency" is central across many humanities discourses. We follow the definition given in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* that "an agent is a being with the capacity to act, and 'agency' denotes the exercise or manifestation of this capacity" (Schlosser, 2019). This often, but not always, implies intentionality on the agent's part.

Stibbe's (2024) text analysis, drawing on functional linguistics, embraces a notion of agency that he calls "activation" (p. 29). For Stibbe, characters, participants in a clause, become activated in three ways: *materially*, when they appear as doing something; *mentally*, when they appear as sensing, feeling or thinking something; or *verbally*, when saying something (pp. 29, 243). This activation goes beyond the distinction between active and passive voice. In addition, activation can transpire through valorisation and affection (pp. 29–30, 248). The ecolinguistic interest in activation is not limited to human agents. Quite on the contrary, many ecolinguists examine whether nonhuman actors are foregrounded in clauses, or are represented as participating, feeling, thinking, empowered, or as following their own purpose.

In her own contribution to *Environment and Narrative*, James, in line with posthumanist approaches, emphasises how ecocriticism makes space for "matter's agency", for example, of ecosystems (in James & Morel, 2020, p. 190). Such a focus undermines the view that nonhuman environmental entities are merely backdrops, mirrors, or catalysts for human agency. "The nonhuman world", as Caracciolo (2022) puts it, "does not, generally, take on autonomous agency" (p. 16). In practical terms, this means investigating, for example, how inanimate matter structures, one might even say animates, the plot in Gonzáles Iñárritu's 2006 movie *Babel* (Caracciolo, in James & Morel, 2020). This dovetails with James and Morel's description of new materialist scholarship in the vein of Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann (2014). James and Morel (2020) pay homage to these pioneers when they "view [...] the material world as possessing its own agency" and "read the earth *as* a text" (p. 3).

The general discussion about agency is analytically separate from the question of whether nonhuman entities have *storytelling* agency. Exploring the spectrum of "storytelling matter", Erin James (2020) admits that while material does not satisfy traditional definitions of narrators, there is the "possibility of collaboration between human storyteller and

nonhuman material” (p. 192). In this spirit, James lists tree rings, ice core rings, and geological strata as entities that may not narrate in a traditional sense, but exhibit “fragments of narrativity” (p. 191). In this vein, Iovino and Oppermann (2014) speak of “storied matter” and suggest that “the world’s material phenomena are knots in a vast network of agencies, which can be ‘read’ and interpreted as forming narratives, stories” (p. 1).

3.4.2. Erasure / disnarration

As a concept opposed to salience, “erasure” in ecolinguistics refers to features that marginalise phenomena, characters, narratives, through their reductive omission or distortion, thereby letting them appear as unimportant (Stibbe, 2024, p. 245). The concept of erasure is grounded in the assumption that the absence of information from text is just as insightful as the stories that appear explicitly and prominently in text (Stibbe, 2021, p. 141). Erasure patterns hint at suppressed information, for example, through complete absence or the masking of particular areas of life. Masking is a rhetorical technique to represent a distorted reality, for instance, a smiling or speaking animal advertising the meat product made from them (Stibbe, 2021). Some linguistic features linked to these erasure patterns are: hypernyms replacing specific names (e.g., “mammals” instead of a concrete species), mass nouns, or functionalisation (e.g., animals are products for human consumption).

Econarratologists are similarly aware that absent or backgrounded elements shape a narrative in consequential ways. A long line of decolonial analyses connects contemporary ecocritical readings with classics such as Edward Said’s *Culture and Imperialism* (1994), which highlights, among other things, the suppression of slavery on Antiguan sugar plantations in Jane Austen’s *Mansfield Park*. Thus, Rebecca Duncan (2024) draws on Said’s “contrapuntal reading” when she reads two South African farm novels and emphasises how they silence (and unsilence) the link between apartheid and environmentalism, respectively.

While omission and backgrounding can certainly catch a narratologist’s attention, a related, yet different phenomenon, “disnarration”, has piqued ecocritical interest. Coined by Gerald Prince (1988), “disnarration” can be defined as “events that do not happen but, nonetheless, are referred to [...] by the narrative text” (p. 2). An econarratological application appears, for example, in Cord-Christian Casper’s (2021) article, “What Is It Not Like to Be a Skylark?”. Casper analyses how nature writers deliberately revoke identification with animals, to uncover the limits of cross-species empathy. This paradoxical anti-narration is different from the kind of erasure with which Stibbe is concerned because it does not operate through omission. Nevertheless, Stibbe, Duncan, and Casper all make, as James puts it in her comments on Casper, “a compelling case for the environmentalist power of what is absent in the text” (James, 2021, p. 156).

3.4.3. Metaphor

Another vital concept used is metaphor. According to Stibbe's practice of ecolinguistics, metaphor is a particular type of framing. Therefore, metaphors function as "cognitive devices which structure one area of life using a frame borrowed from another separate [...] area" (Stibbe, n.d., Chapter 4). Stibbe (2021) contrasts the metaphor "CLIMATE CHANGE IS A TIME BOMB" to the literal framing "CLIMATE CHANGE IS A PREDICAMENT" (p. 61), with the former implying that adaptation to climate change is futile. Metaphor thus has a powerful role in shaping people's mindsets. Consequently, metaphors are vehicles for ecologically detrimental ideologies. Cognitive research bolsters this view by showing that reasoning often happens unconsciously and follows the logic of frames and metaphors (see the classic cognitive linguistic work in Lakoff, 2010).

In so far as traditional metaphor operates on the smaller scale of the sentence or paragraph, narratologists are less often concerned with it. Nevertheless, they might take notice of key metaphors as they interact with larger structures of a narrative. Johanna Lindbo (2024), for example, analyses how metaphors in Birgitta Trotzig's short story *Ormflïckan* (*The Snake Girl*) cue readers' attention towards the "complex porosity between the human and the more-than-human" (p. 146). The title itself, *The Snake Girl*, exemplifies this interspecies porousness, a metaphor that undergirds the story as a whole rather than just acting on a local level.

In "Notes for an Econarratological Theory of Character", Caracciolo, too, is concerned with a kindred concept, namely the metaphor of the mesh. After acknowledging ecolinguistic and cognitive scholars such as Goatly and Lakoff, Caracciolo investigates metaphors in Richard Powers's novel, *The Echo Maker*, with a particular focus on how nonhuman actants such as cranes and tides acquire character status. Asking, "isn't this 'just' a metaphor?" he responds by questioning the sharp lines between the literal and figurative:

Metaphors, and particularly the creative metaphors that are deployed by literary narrative, [...] participate in a process of discovery of human–nonhuman entanglements [...]. If we dismiss the notion of nonhuman actant [sic] as a 'mere' metaphor, we have already closed the door on that possibility of discovery. (Caracciolo, 2018, pp. 187–188)

Metaphors are therefore more than just an embellishment. They can offer a different world view (we might see this as one building block of ecosophies) and enact an almost magical departure from Anthropocentric dualisms.

4. Discussion

Having outlined disciplinary genealogies, methodologies, and typical fields of application, we return to the question of why ecolinguistics and econarratology do not speak more to

each other. Ultimately, we are most interested in how their tools can be combined fruitfully to benefit environmental communication. To this end, we summarise relevant disciplinary overlaps and differences between the two disciplines before highlighting shared ambitions.

4.1. Overlaps

4.1.1. Overlap 1: “Narrative” as conceptual axis with different meanings

As outlined in Section 3, the concept of narrative is central to both econarratology and ecolinguistics, although the term is used in different ways. On the one hand, the recent “econarratological turn” (Steffensen, 2025, p. 15) in ecolinguistics reflects a new dedication towards narratology. Further, it represents Steffensen’s acknowledgement of the econarratological groundwork by Erin James, which Stibbe equally alludes to in his 2024 monograph *Econarrative*. On the other hand, Stibbe’s (2024) usage of the term “econarrative” is a continuation of what he had previously termed “stories we live by” (Steffensen, 2025). Regardless of the link to econarratology, Stibbe emphasises that these “narratives” are not neatly congruent with the narratological use. For Stibbe in particular, narratives are both cognitive structures underlying text, and narrative texts, while econarratologists focus primarily on the textual level. In his recent article “Narrative Ecology”, Stibbe (2026) goes even further to express “the power of narratives” (p. 17) “in terms of influencing cognition” (p. 18). We attribute this conceptual difference between econarratology and ecolinguistics to the respective genealogies of the two disciplines and the way they define their objects of study.

Despite these methodological differences, the underlying narratives, previously “stories” in Stibbean ecolinguistics, come close to what Heise and Pham grant narratives value for. According to Stibbe, narrative structures function as commonsense patterns across the minds of people, giving insight into how people treat each other and their environments (Stibbe, 2024). In the words of Nigerian writer Ben Okri, “Stories are the secret reservoirs of values” (in Stibbe, 2021, p. 3). In a similar vein, First Nation novelist Thomas King (2008) captures the transformative power of narratives with his rhetorical question, “Want a different ethic? Tell a different story” (p. 164). Heise and Pham’s (2024) take on narratives is very similar: they see it as a crucial task for environmental humanists to explore “how different historical and cultural communities think about humans in their natural environments, about environmental crises, and about possible ways of overcoming them” (p. 18).

Ecolinguistics in Stibbe’s vein is consciously mobilising, even if not copying, econarratological concepts. This convergence becomes explicit when Stibbe (2024) refers to James’s concept of the “storyworld” while explaining how real-world events are rendered in fictional and non-fictional stories (p. 8). At the same time, Stibbe’s (2026) most recent paper coins his new concept of narrative ecology “as a branch of ecology rather than a branch of narratology” (p. 3). To our knowledge, econarratology has yet to explicitly

engage ecolinguistic thinking; a move that would uncover synergies as much as productive differences. The above-mentioned nod by Caracciolo to Goatly and Lakoff is a first step in that direction.

The *interdisciplinary* differences and overlaps we just explored have a curious *intradisciplinary* echo, as scholars within the same field struggle to agree on one definition. Stibbe (2024) says as much when he writes,

[n]arratives come in many forms [...]. There will undoubtedly be an example within the line which does not really seem like a narrative, and something outside the line which actually does seem like one. (p. 9)

Similarly, Erin James acknowledges in *The Storyworld Accord* (2015) that “[n]arrative is a notoriously difficult word to define, and various narrative scholars place emphasis on different aspects of narrative as essential components” (p. 248). This inter- and intra-disciplinary definitorial diversity should not keep us from collaborating (cf. Section 5 for concrete benefits of such collaboration).

4.1.2. *Overlap 2: Method — broad scale of analysis and key concepts*

Another similarity between the disciplines has to do with scale. Econarratological and ecolinguistic analysis can range from a minute linguistic scale concerned with grammatical features in clauses, lexis, and metaphors to higher-order patterns of temporality and perspective (e.g., Goatly, 1996, 2018; James & Morel, 2020). Most importantly, however, the two fields overlap in some of their analytical categories. The concept of agency is particularly relevant to both disciplines, although Stibbe uses the term “activation” (see Section 3.4). Other overlaps concern the notions of salience and erasure. Metaphors, too, are vital categories in both disciplines. The categories of evaluations and framing, central to Stibbe’s analysis, are equally embedded in econarratology, although less explicitly.

4.1.3. *Overlap 3: Axiomatic subscription to social constructivism and the material turn*

Econarratology and ecolinguistics are both committed to social constructivism. Both thus subscribe to the belief that humans build their own social environments in negotiation with others, and that language and narratives play a key role in this process. Stibbe’s (2014) work, for example, inquires how socially constructed discourses impact the ways humans treat each other and their environments (also see Section 3). Narratologists, too, understand the generative power of discourse and narratives in the genesis of social realities. Thus, Ryan (1991) speaks of “the world-making activity” (p. 110) that is narrating. With respect to the cultural grounding of narratives explained in Overlap 1, the material turn is another belief shared by both disciplines: ecolinguists and econarratologists tend to grant agency to non-human and often even non-living entities. With this insight comes an acknowledgement

that traditional notions of active subject and passive object positions are neither as dualistic nor as human-centred as long assumed. In the following section, we exemplify this by touching on the entanglement between (eco)philosophies and languages.

4.1.4. *Overlap 4: Ecological problems as culturally created and mediated*

This gives momentum to the supposition that ecological problems arise to a great extent from cultural phenomena in the form of values, power relations, and narratives. Not coincidentally, the idea that ecological “challenges are as much cultural and political as they are scientific and technological” is a core idea of the environmental humanities (Laboratory for Environmental Narrative Strategies, n.d.).

Both ecolinguistics and econarratology share an interest in the mutually constitutive relation between culturally variable philosophies and language. Conversely, both disciplines are intrigued by the influence of discourses on human action. Stibbe, for instance, often provides examples from East Asian cultures such as Japanese haiku that prioritise natural entities. By casting these as agentive, haiku suggest that the human is not the dominant entity in the ecological world (2024, p. 86). Complementarily, Goatly argues that dualist thinking has supported the disastrous domination of humans over nature. He quotes philosopher Nolan Pliny Jacobson (1996) who points out that Western views enshrine “the subject–object duality of thought and thing, mind and body [...], man and nature” (Goatly, 1996, p. 556).

In econarratology, too, a non-European canon is gaining more attention. Erin James (2015) mobilises a postcolonial lens and defines her titular storyworld accord as an “environmental treaty sensitive to the *cultural differences* of environmental imagination” (p. 253, emphasis added). Going one step further, with *Environment and Narrative in Vietnam*, Heise and Pham dedicate a whole eco-narratological volume to non-Western narratives and their hitherto underappreciated implications. Having outlined vital commonalities, we now turn towards methodological differences.

4.2. *Differences*

4.2.1. *Difference 1: Object of study*

Econarratology and ecolinguistics have different objects of study. In their analyses, both disciplines look at patterns and structures immanent in text. However, ecolinguistics gives great importance to societally shared cognitive structures transported through text. Compare that with the focus on the textual level, as we typically find it in econarratology. Narratological analysis puts emphasis on how readers receive a text. Empirical literary studies consequently assess readers’ interpretations and responses. A notable contribution to the latter comes in the form of the 2023 volume *Empirical Ecocriticism* (Schneider-Mayerson et al., 2023), in which literary and media scholars exemplify how such empirical

groundwork can look.

4.2.2. *Difference 2: Types of discourses*

Another difference also concerns the object of study, but details the media with which each discipline works: Grounded in its literary studies origin, econarratology favoured literary written fictional texts for a long time. A new generation of econarratologists, however, has embarked on discovering non-literary and/or nonfictional texts. This contrasts with the field of ecolinguistics and its key term “discourse”, a concept that has included non-written and non-literary sources from the beginning.

4.2.3. *Difference 3: Epistemologies*

The most fundamental distinction between econarratology and ecolinguistics lies in their different disciplinary backgrounds, which partially explains why there is no systematic collaboration (yet). While econarratology is anchored within the humanistic tradition, ecolinguistics, in line with the broader field of socio- and psycholinguistics, has close affiliation with the social sciences. Related to that is the value the disciplines give to empirical grounding: Assumptions by ecolinguistic scholars sometimes draw on empirical methodology, for example, social cognition research or studies on perception (Penz & Fill, 2002; Stibbe, 2021). Empirical ecocriticism (cf. Schneider-Mayerson et al., 2023; see above) is likely to spawn further econarratological interest in quantitative studies. Despite their respective foci, ecolinguistics and econarratology both take humanist and social scientific traditions into account. We do not deny these epistemological differences; rather, we use them to prove that econarratological and ecolinguistic tools could be combined interdisciplinarily. Ultimately, both disciplines aim at changing communication towards what Stibbe calls “eco-positive” narratives and thinking.

4.2.4. *Difference 4: The normative stance (a gap closing?)*

This brings us to the normative call, explicit in ecolinguistics and increasingly present in econarratology, to build and support eco-positive communication. Strengthening ecologically beneficial narratives as an antidote to mainstream industrial and consumerist cultures is necessary for tackling ecological problems (Ma & Stibbe 2022, p. 166; as mentioned before, this is also the very premise of the environmental humanities). Ecolinguistics in the Stibbean tradition is openly activist, clearly seeing the field as practical, “goal-orientated” rather than “exploratory” (Stibbe, 2010, p. 419). Ha (2023), citing Halliday’s work, attributes an inherent “social accountability” to ecolinguistics, which is to model ecological awareness through language and narratives (p. 247; see Section 2.1).

While most econarratological scholarship, including James’s and Caracciolo’s, is eco-critical, many scholars are reticent about overt activism. Morel, for example, calls it

“reductive [...]” to judge climate fiction primarily by its efficiency as a politicisation tool (in James & Morel, 2020, p. 69). Caracciolo’s above-mentioned skepticism that reading sparks pro-environmental action, dovetails with this sentiment as well (Wang & Caracciolo, 2022, p. 8). Econarratology and ecolinguistics thus differ in their eagerness to pursue normative goals. Recent literary scholarship, however, demonstrates a more activist thrive, as embodied in the title of Caroline Levine’s book *The Activist Humanist* (2023). And even Erin James, who does not see her scholarship as mere advocacy, hopes that we can address real-world problems by understanding how the “Anthropocene is both produced and mitigated by narratives” (in James & Morel, 2020, p. 184).

The shared normative stance is at the same time the core of the promise a collaboration holds. To achieve this, we conjecture in line with Stibbe that we need an interdisciplinary econarrative practice to transform discourses (2024, p. 227). This ultimately means that we must go beyond disciplinary and epistemological boundaries: We need to integrate “different ways of knowing, that include the scientific, analytic, empathic, experiential, embodied, creative and practical” (Stibbe, 2024, p. 235). Such involvement of various knowledge systems is an appeal to create alliances: not just within, but also beyond the university.

5. A plea for interdisciplinary collaboration

We hope to have shown that ecolinguistics and econarratology are — pun intended — *natural* collaborators in the environmental humanities. In light of the ecological challenges we face, their dialogue is both overdue and reason for hope. As we discussed, the two fields share enough theoretical, ethical, and methodological concerns to warrant sustained cooperation. Such a systemic dialogue between ecolinguistics and econarratology aligns with Stibbe’s (2026) latest concept of “narrative ecology” as a transdisciplinary approach. This is not to say that the disciplines dovetail without friction; there are valid intellectual and institutional reasons for the collaborative hesitance so far. Yet, we venture that these frictions are productive rather than a reason to work in ignorance of each other. At a time when ecological emergencies are ramping up, we need all disciplinary hands on deck, so to speak, especially, if the metaphorical crews have set their compasses in ways as concordant as ecolinguistics and econarratology. A sustained communication and exchange may be vital first steps, and very much in the spirit of Stibbe’s latest thinking.

While the disciplines agree with respect to important theoretical inclinations, their applied potential is equally promising. In line with Stibbe’s (2026) invitation for “attempting consilience of narratology and ecological science” (p. 3), we believe that econarratological and ecolinguistic analysis can emerge as twin tools for applied eco-positive communication. In Stibbe’s (2024) spirit, we offer our essay in support of a future that teaches econarrative visioning as a basic competence (p. 226), a skill everybody can integrate in speeches, writing, textbooks, and media for children (p. 227). Educational contexts come to mind as one such field of application; think, for example, of uncovering

harmful discourses in textbooks (Poole, 2025; Stibbe, 2025, in personal communication with the authors). We envision students who analyse the same material through parallel disciplinary approaches; workshops in which participants draw on both traditions to write eco-positive narratives; or policy makers whose public communication is informed (and dare we say, enhanced) by ecolinguistic and econarratological prowess. Further cross-fertilisation offers itself. Climate psychology is one field where an integrated econarrative toolbox comes in handy. For example, we imagine a practice in which positive visioning becomes part of dealing with climate anxieties. This equally matters for environmental justice issues: what narratives circulate among communities who are differently affected by ecological threats, and how can community-specific storytelling counter representational injustice? This, in turn, connects smoothly with the call to widen the regional scope of sources to include more non-Western worldviews. Another valuable expansion has to do with the media we analyse ecocritically. If we follow Boisvere (2025), we can begin to sketch what a transmedial econarratology might look like. Lastly, both disciplines could refine their empirical grounding and test assumptions about readers' cognition and reaction. This would build additional credibility for the endeavour that is eco-positive communication.

The practical and theoretical promises for collaboration are not just necessary, but within reach. We hope our essay contours this opportunity so others can continue this interdisciplinary conversation. We are adamant that the lack of collaboration does not hint at a sibling rivalry. On the contrary, we believe in a love story that is all the richer for its methodological and genealogical differences.

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