



Article

Beyond the horizon: A more-than-human and holistic approach to language

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Abstract

This position paper proposes a more-than-human and holistic approach to language that moves beyond entrenched divides between structuralism, constructivism, positivism, and methodological camps. Writing under the collective pseudonym Gaya Seldon, we argue that many oppositions in linguistics, particularly the equation of quantitative methods with positivism and structuralism, rest on reductive misreadings. Structuralism, we contend, is not inherently anti-social or anti-agentive but grounded in relationality; its caricature has contributed to theoretical fragmentation and epistemic silos. At the same time, constructivist and decolonial turns, while critically valuable, often remain entangled in colonial, extractivist, capitalist, hegemonic, and anthropocentric logics. We propose an ecolinguistic, holistic framework that disentangles method from epistemology and repositions language as emerging within dynamic, relational systems that include human and more-than-human actors. Drawing on critical quantitative approaches, dynamic systems theory, and more-than-human ecolinguistics, we advocate principled methodological openness grounded in care, reflexivity, and ethical accountability. Rather than methodological eclecticism, we call for a relational praxis capable of integrating qualitative and quantitative tools while foregrounding socio-ecological justice and interdependence across living systems.

Keywords: ecolinguistics; structuralism; constructivism; more-than-human; dynamic systems theory

1. Introduction

This position paper is the result of several intellectual discussions about linguistics and its position within a broader discourse of historical development, research practices, and anti-

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colonial principles. The pseudonym *Gaya Seldon*, under which we write, reflects the fact that the paper is the product of the continuous dialogue between its two authors (Jessica Hampton and Stefano Coretta): its arguments have organically arisen from the authors' minds acting as one, rather than from divided labour. Yet, our individual experiences have helped shape the contents herein reported. For this reason, before getting to the subject matter of the paper, we provide the reader with our own individual positionality statements, followed by the conjoined, organic positionality of the pseudonymic author, Gaya Seldon, as it has emerged in our collective mind.

- **Jessica Hampton:** Building on the positionality articulated in my doctoral research, I continue to view the social world as inseparable from the environments — human and more-than-human — that shape it. During my PhD I recognised this worldview as resonant with posthumanist thought and situated my work within both poststructuralist and posthumanist traditions, understanding reality as plural, situated, and in constant flux. In line with this principle of flux, my focus has evolved. I now describe myself as an environmental sociolinguist informed by a more-than-human ontology, seeking to explore how language can help to reconcile the wounds of the contemporary polycrisis through processes of trauma acknowledgement and healing. My own trajectory also informs this stance: like my co-author Stefano, I grew up in northern Italy, and I have found a second home in Liverpool — a city whose struggle and resilience echo my own past. I write as a spiritual being attentive to connection and interconnectedness, committed to an applied linguistics that engages with the living world in all its entanglements.
- **Stefano Coretta:** I identify as a neurodiverse academic of Mediterranean ethnicity. I was born and raised in Italy, but I have been living in the United Kingdom for a decade and I think of this country as my home. My philosophical stance is a syncretic integration of non-dual monism, anti-realism, holism, cosmopsychism, spiritualism, subjective Bayesian epistemology, and ecological awareness. Ontologically, this framework assumes a monistic reality beyond Cartesian dualism, rejecting a strict mind-independent/mind-dependent divide and treating mind, consciousness, experience, and cosmos as expressions of a single non-dual reality. Cosmopsychism adds that the cosmos is fundamentally experiential, with individual experience deriving from a cosmic field, while holism frames reality, knowledge, and explanation as inherently relational and whole-based. Epistemologically, Bayesianism underpins belief updating under uncertainty via priors and evidence, and quantitative methods are taken not as reductionist explanations but as tools for numerical representation and operationalisation of phenomena.
- **Gaya Seldon:** I am a collective scholarly voice grounded in lived experiences of

marginality and care. I practise spirituality as an ethic of respect towards human and more-than-human worlds, and my lived experience is informed by historically marginalised knowledge systems¹ shaped by poverty, disability, and the feminine. My positionality is situated in a more-than-human and ecological orientation that understands language, meaning, and social life as entangled with living systems and relations. I explicitly reject positivist epistemologies, approaching knowledge instead as situated, relational, and ethically accountable. From this position, I seek to contribute to scholarship that foregrounds care, reflexivity, and responsibility in the face of social and ecological harm.

2. The emergence of structuralism and sociolinguistics

Linguistics as a field has long been shaped by theoretical and methodological divides, often framed in terms of stark oppositions that obscure the complexities of language, society, and knowledge. From the foundational work of Saussure and the emergence of structuralism, through post-structuralist and constructivist critiques, and into contemporary decolonial approaches, the history of the discipline reflects not only shifts in analytical tools, but also changes in our assumptions about who counts as a “person of knowledge”, what counts as valid evidence, and how knowledge should be applied. In this position paper, we argue that many of these dichotomies (particularly the supposed opposition between structuralism and constructivism) are largely artificial. Mischaracterisations of structuralism as inherently positivist, individual-denying, or anti-social have led to unjustified assumptions about the methods and epistemologies available to sociolinguists. We take the stance that it is not the method itself, whether quantitative, qualitative, or mixed, that is problematic, but rather how it is deployed and interpreted; statistical tools (often blindly conflated with positivist/structuralist views), when applied thoughtfully and critically, can complement qualitative insights and support research that is ethically, culturally, and ecologically informed.

As aptly described by Steffensen (2015, p. 106), “classical 20th century linguistics, be it in its structural or its generative guise, emerged through a strong centripetal force which gave rise to the idea of language as a coherent, delineated parcel — a formal code — to be scrutinised by linguists”. This later developed into a “3I” view of language: Internal, Instrumental, and Individual. Language was considered *internal* in that it resided in speakers’ minds or brains; *instrumental*, functioning as a tool for communication or for the expression of thought; and *individual*, fully describable as a mental faculty or behavioural habit. While this framework provided methodological rigour, it also fostered assumptions that have persisted in mischaracterisations of structuralism as rigid, anti-social, or opposed to individual agency.

¹ We use *knowledge system* to mean what Western philosophy would refer to as “onto-epistemology”. To go beyond the Western-specific separation of being (ontology) and knowing (epistemology), we use the term “knowledge system” to encompass being and knowing and more.

From this foundation, linguistics diversified into a range of subfields that developed within the social and behavioural sciences, even as language and discourse were becoming central theoretical concerns in the humanities (McNamara, 2012). These parallel developments were informed by post-structuralism and constructivism which emerged in the latter half of the 20th century as theoretical critiques of structuralism. Rather than representing a clean theoretical break from structuralism, these alternative approaches reflect distinct institutional trajectories that retained methodological rigour while gradually expanding their objects of inquiry.

Sociolinguistics emerged in the mid-20th century with scholars such as Labov and Trudgill systematically investigating language variation across communities. While sociolinguistics adopted quantitative methods to identify patterns of variation, this methodological rigour should not be conflated with a structuralist ontology of language as a closed or purely internal system. From its inception, sociolinguistics was concerned with language as socially distributed and socially meaningful. In its later developments, particularly in third-wave sociolinguistics (see, for example, Eckert, 2012), the field has increasingly emphasised situated practice, identity construction, and power relations, understanding linguistic patterns as emerging from the dynamic interaction of speakers, communities, and environments rather than from an abstract, individual-bound code.

Applied linguistics developed in parallel, oriented towards practical concerns such as language learning, translation, policy, and planning. While early applied linguistics made use of structuralist descriptive tools for grammar and phonology, it remained firmly embedded within a social-scientific framework. Over time, it incorporated functional, communicative, and usage-based approaches, shifting attention from the analysis of abstract linguistic systems to the study of language in use. However, as McNamara (2012) observes, applied linguistics has often drawn on post-structuralist concepts from the humanities without fully engaging with their radical critique of modernist assumptions, meaning that, rather than a real break with earlier thinking, the field often ends up combining ideas in selective and not always fully thought-through ways.

As Joseph (2023) puts it, structuralism designates the approach to language analysis which brought linguistics into the modern era and turned semiotics from an outline programme into an academic discipline. Saussure's (1857–1913) posthumous *Cours de linguistique générale* (1916) has shaped the field of linguistics as we know it and can be seen as the development of a hundred years of thinkers in anthropology, sociology and related disciplines. The *Cours* is thought as the foundational piece of work of linguistic structuralism. The main contribution of Saussure, which sets his approach apart from earlier linguistic philology, is his reframing of synchrony and diachrony, whereby language is approached as a system of values at a given moment, and diachronic analysis emerges from the comparison of such synchronic states. While this aspect is relatively uncontroversial, the true nature of *structuralism*, as embodied in Saussure's work, has more often than not evaded a clear-cut definition. To quote Joseph (2023) again, “[m]any accounts of structuralism are based largely on reductivist characterisations by people

aiming to distance themselves from it”.

However, structuralism is not many of the things constructivism takes it to be. As brilliantly summarised by Joseph (2023), structuralism is not, among other things, a denial of subjecthood nor anti-social. These two aspects, individual agency and rapport with the larger network of society, are the *crux* of the development of constructivist approaches. These go hand in hand with the rejection of positivism and everything that can be vaguely associated with it, like quantitative methods. For example, Denscombe (2025) says decolonialism “rejects the positivistic world view of Western research along with its reliance on scientific methods and its use of quantitative data in support of neo-colonial agendas and ideology”. (Although they later add that this “is not to suggest that decolonial research excludes the use of quantitative methods altogether”).

3. The problem

Constructivist linguistics has often narrated its own emergence as a corrective to a supposedly reductionist structuralism: a move from abstract systems to lived experience, from form to meaning, from structure to agency. Yet this self-positioning may rest on a conceptual misunderstanding: what we might call a case of “when the solution becomes the problem”. Structuralism was never simply a claim that humans are reducible to structure. Rather, it was an ontological commitment to relationality: that linguistic elements acquire value through patterned relations within systems. Over time, however, structuralism became conflated with particular methodological choices, especially quantitative methods and positivism. While different forms of positivism exist, both historically and in current practice, we primarily refer to logical positivism, as developed by the Vienna Circle, whereby propositions are considered meaningful if they are empirically verifiable, and metaphysics and theology are rejected. This is at least the form of positivism implied, in our opinion, in the quantitative/positivist equation as purported in constructivist critiques of quantitative methodologies (see, for example, Denscombe, 2025; Pownall, 2025). The equation “quantitative = positivist = structuralist” and, conversely, “qualitative = constructivist = anti-structuralist” reflects a mistaken association. This conflation of ontology with method has led to the rejection of structuralism not because of its actual theoretical commitments, but because of a caricature that reduces it to measurement and determinism. There is a deep irony here: in essentialising structuralism as inherently reductionist, constructivist critiques risk reproducing the very move they denounce, i.e. collapsing a complex theoretical tradition into a single, fixed essence. The problem is less structuralism than a reductivist reading of it.

Historically, however, structuralism has never been confined to a single explanatory level. It has always contained a delicate interplay of multiple levels: formal, functional, cognitive, and social. Functional approaches, such as Greenbergian typology and certain schools of cognitive linguistics, have long emphasised tendencies rather than rigid universals, highlighting probabilistic patterns across languages rather than deterministic

laws. Even the Minimalist programme (Chomsky, 2001), often invoked as emblematic of reductionism, can be thought primarily as reductionist in its biological orientation to language, not in its ontology *per se*. To portray structuralism as blind to meaning, variation, or cognition overlooks how structural, functional, and cognitive paradigms have historically intersected. The rejection of structuralism thus risks discarding the very relational architecture that makes systematic inquiry possible.

Indeed, the result has been a fragmentation of the field, where theoretical separatism fosters increasingly individualistic positionalities (Datta, 1994). At times, epistemic echo chambers are created on the assumption that quantitative methods are necessarily positivist and “structuralist” (as mistakenly understood), while in our view, which by the way rejects positivism (for the reasons mentioned in our positionalities above), quantitative methods still have a place, independently from the knowledge system adopted (Reichardt & Rallis, 1994). By opposing structuralism in broad strokes, constructivist/post-structuralist informed sociolinguistics has sometimes neglected to interrogate what structuralism actually entails and whether structural description necessarily entails epistemological naïveté. In distancing itself from structure in order to foreground agency and experience, the discipline may have inadvertently weakened its capacity to theorise how patterned regularities and social meanings co-constitute one another in a dynamic landscape. This has very tangible effects on the development of researchers, their positioning, and the way their work and their stance are perceived by others. For example, Jessica adopted a mixed-method approach in her doctoral project; however, when publishing an article based on her thesis, a reviewer advised her to position the study within a language variation and change framework solely because of its use of statistical analyses. Likewise, Stefano’s approach is often assumed to be positivist purely due to his expertise in statistics, and this has proven to be a source of friction in how his work is received and assessed.

A more productive path would disentangle method from the knowledge system, and recognise that quantitative approaches need not be positivist, just as qualitative approaches are not inherently constructivist. Re-engaging structuralism on its own terms (rather than through a simplified proxy) could reopen dialogue across subfields and counteract the centrifugal tendencies that have produced theoretical silos.

While it has some merit, we believe that the constructivist approach informing much sociolinguistic research is providing a false sense of security that avoids questioning whether the adopted views of language are indeed unproblematic. In our own view, constructivist linguistics is still colonial, capitalist, extractivist, hegemonic, and anthropocentric. Despite their critical stance, many constructivist approaches in linguistics continue to reproduce structural inequities and epistemic biases:

- **Colonial:** By framing researchers as “saviours” of marginalised communities, constructivist methods often reinforce hierarchical relationships between the researcher and researched, reproducing a form of white-saviour epistemology. Furthermore, it is mostly white folk that, from a position of privilege, dictate what

is decolonial and what steps have to be taken to make research anticolonial. Yet, in our experience, alternative world views, like spiritualism and eco-awareness, are taken less seriously.

- **Capitalist:** Academic research often prioritises publication, citations, and grant metrics over care for data or ethical obligations to communities. Constructivist methods, even when socially aware, frequently operate within this economic logic. We also think sociolinguistics is capitalistic in that it contributes towards the market of publication in high-tier outlets and towards the rush of obtaining monetary funding. Care is placed on the novelty and originality of findings, over the soundness of theory, both conceptual and methodological theory. Career is prioritised over substance. Ongoing research crises, spanning different research aspects from generalisability to research integrity, have shown again and again how deep this issue is and how it affects many research strands across disciplines and methodologies.
- **Extractivist:** In the current decolonial turning point, Indigenous scholars have drawn sustained attention to the extractivist logics that continue to shape academic knowledge production. Linguistic data and, more broadly, Indigenous knowledge are often treated as a resource to be mined: collected, abstracted, and circulated within academic economies without sufficient acknowledgement of its sources or consideration of the consequences of its extraction for the communities from which it originates. Even participatory or co-creative approaches, while offering an important corrective, do not in themselves resolve this issue. What is required is intentionality at every stage of the research process, including decisions about what is recorded, how it is analysed, how it is represented, and where and for whom it is ultimately disseminated. From this perspective, data is not disposable or infinitely reusable, but relational, situated, and ethically bound to the people and ecologies that give rise to it.
- **Hegemonic:** Closely related to this extractivist logic is the persistence of hegemonic knowledge regimes that continue to privilege dominant academic paradigms over Indigenous and other marginalised ways of knowing. Indigenous researchers have repeatedly highlighted how their knowledge systems are appropriated, reframed, or selectively cited within Western theoretical frameworks, often without proper attribution or recognition of their epistemic origins. Such practices reinforce hierarchies in which alternative epistemologies are rendered supplementary, anecdotal, or “contextual”, rather than being recognised as theory-generating in their own right. In this way, even research that positions itself as critical or decolonial can reproduce hegemonic structures, maintaining control over what counts as legitimate knowledge, who is authorised to produce it, and

how it may circulate within academic institutions.

- **Anthropocentric:** Many approaches assume human exceptionalism, positioning humans as fundamentally distinct from or above ecological and more-than-human systems. This limits our understanding of language and cognition as embedded in broader environmental and cosmic contexts. Sociolinguistics is still mainly anthropocentric. The mistaken idea that structuralism was not interested in society and individual agency has possibly led to a hyperbolic focus on humanity and humans. Modern constructivist sociolinguistics lacks a sufficiently developed critique in light of ecological awareness. Humans are the species of supremacy; they control and bend the environment to their own advantage. Whether sociolinguistic thinking is made from a Eurocentric or anticolonial perspective, we must recognise where and how humans are placed within the larger terrestrial ecosystem. This anthropocentrism is evident in neighbouring subfields such as evolutionary linguistics, which readily advances large-scale hypotheses about prehistoric human populations and cognition. Yet attempts to situate linguistic development within broader ecological systems are often dismissed as speculative, revealing an enduring attachment to human exceptionalism rather than a consistent commitment to rigour.

4. Towards an alternative

To move beyond these limitations, we advocate for an ecolinguistic and decolonial knowledge system that recognises humans as part of a wider web of life: the rocks, rivers, oceans, animals, and celestial bodies that coexist with us across time and space. This perspective demands that we move beyond entrenched methodological and conceptual divides. It calls for: overcoming artificial dichotomies such as language versus dialect, or qualitative versus quantitative methods; applying quantitative methods critically, recognising that statistical approaches, including Bayesian inference, can complement qualitative insights by offering nuanced readings of distributions and probabilities; engaging with models of dynamic systems theories that enable the analysis of societies as complex, non-linear systems without reducing humans to isolated or essentialised data points; and recognising non-human forms of communication which highlight the agency of other species such as animals and plants.

Crucially, this view demands the application of quantitative methods with critical awareness. Metrics that fail to capture individual variability or that fall outside conventional distributions should not be discarded but treated as opportunities to refine understanding, broaden conceptual frameworks, and adjust linguistic and analytical terminology (for example, using “Gaussian” rather than “normal” to describe such distributions; see the de-normalisation approach in *crip linguistics*, e.g. Canagarajah, 2023; Henner & Robinson, 2023; Henner, 2024). By attending to the full range of variation, researchers can integrate

quantitative insights without sacrificing ethical or ecological sensitivity, fostering approaches that respect both the uniqueness of individual agents and the broader relational contexts in which they are situated. While individual behaviour may resist prediction, aggregate patterns can nevertheless inform linguistic inquiry and support ethically grounded interventions aimed at social justice.

More recently, the approach of causal inference enabled us to think about causal relationships between entities and obtain a quantitative estimate of the causal effect of one entity over another (see Rohrer, 2018). This approach breaks away from the problematic statement “correlation is not causation”, when causation is an important aspect of any research within any framework. Even Eastern philosophies like Hinduism and Daoism reflect on causality, albeit not in the mechanistic way Western philosophies do. For classic Hinduism, the main concepts of *karman* ‘action’ (*karma* in the nominative form) and *dharma* ‘justice’ create a system of causality where actions produce consequences that are aligned with a cosmic law. In Daoism, causality is understood as the flow of *Dao* ‘The Way’ (道 Pinyin: dào). In sum, causality needs not be interpreted strictly within a positivist and materialistic view.

Dynamic systems offer a way of conceptualising complex relations in terms of a system that can be described mathematically but it is not necessarily deterministic (Thelen & Smith, 2006). A dynamic system is more than the sum of its parts, and the behaviour of the system emerges from the interaction of the elements in the system. Relationality is thus central to the concept of dynamic system. One can visualise a dynamic system as a complex landscape formed by peaks, valleys, coasts and plateaus: in this landscape, the system’s behaviour is shaped by so-called “basins of attraction”, i.e. locations in the landscape towards which the behaviour is pulled and around which the system reaches (temporary) stability. Stability can only be temporary because of the dynamic nature of the landscape: certain behaviours attract or repel others, the landscape is in constant flux, and different stable states can emerge throughout the life of the system. Dynamic systems can be used to observe and analyse the holistic development of language and communication acts, when coupled with the granular focus of ecolinguistics, while both focus on the concept of relationality.

The orientation we propose also requires a sustained commitment to co-creation, intentionality, and care. Data collection and analysis must remain ethically accountable to the people and ecologies from which knowledge emerges, ensuring that voices and relations are honoured and that nothing is treated as disposable. Extending this commitment further, an ecolinguistic approach invites the incorporation of more-than-human perspectives, including studies of animal and plant communication and environmental feedback systems, challenging anthropocentric assumptions and the notion of human exceptionalism that continues to constrain much linguistic theory.

In a more-than-human ecolinguistic perspective (for example, Stibbe, 2020, 2021a, 2021b, 2026), language is understood as part of broader ecological networks, where communication extends beyond humans to include animals and plants. Animal vocalisations, gestures, and behavioural patterns, as well as plant chemical signalling,

function as meaningful exchanges that shape interactions within ecosystems. Recognising these non-human forms of communication highlights the agency of other species, showing that humans are entangled with and responsive to the discursive processes of the living world. This approach reframes language as an ecological phenomenon, emphasising interdependence, co-creation of meaning, and the ethical imperative to attend to the voices of non-human beings.

We propose a framework that does not pit structuralism against constructivism, nor quantitative against qualitative methods. Instead, it foregrounds ethical, ecological, and critically reflective practices capable of mobilising diverse methodological tools while remaining attentive to human and non-human interdependence. The aim is not methodological eclecticism for its own sake, but a principled openness that allows linguistic research to be both rigorous and socio-ecologically just.

Our choice to write under the collective pseudonym *Gaya Seldon* embodies this position. The pseudonym is not a neutral amalgamation of individual identities, but an analytic and ethical stance — an econarrative of scholarly identity that reflects the commitments articulated in this paper. It marks a deliberate shift away from singular authorship towards a relational mode of knowledge production in which perspectives are held in tension rather than resolved, and epistemic completeness is neither assumed nor sought. Writing as *Gaya Seldon* foregrounds relationality over identity and process over fixity. It enables a more-than-human orientation in which language, knowledge, and meaning are understood as emergent from entangled material, ecological, and semiotic relations. Rather than reiterating individual philosophical or biographical positions, *Gaya Seldon* functions as a situated epistemic assemblage through which plural ontologies and non-positivist ways of knowing can enter into dialogue.

Adopting this pseudonym is therefore also a methodological intervention. It resists extractive and individualising academic conventions, aligning instead with a reflexive, open, and accountable research practice oriented towards care, repair, and ethical engagement in contexts of social and ecological disturbance. As *Gaya Seldon*, we write not to stabilise meaning or claim authority, but to remain responsive to uncertainty, interdependence, and the living worlds with which our research is entangled.

5. Conclusion

Our holistic approach transcends rigid divides such as structuralism, constructivism, and positivism, which we view as historical contingencies rather than essential frameworks. Tools are instrumental; the emphasis is on relationality, enabling social and ecological justice concerns to be addressed more directly. In qualitative research, it foregrounds context, interactions, and the co-construction of meaning, acknowledging that narratives and observations are embedded within complex social and ecological networks, including the more-than-human actors that shape communicative and ecological processes. In quantitative research, it emphasises that analyses are situated, capturing only a temporally

and relationally specific “snapshot” of the system, which may reflect a transiently stable state rather than absolute patterns. In mixed-methods approaches, these perspectives converge, highlighting the complementarities of qualitative and quantitative insights while maintaining attention to relationality, ecological interdependence, and the contingent agency of human and non-human participants.

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