



## Ecology and Environmental Discourse in Contemporary Fiction

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### Abstract

This paper investigates the emerging field of ecolinguistics and its application to contemporary literary fiction that engages with environmental crisis. By analyzing the linguistic strategies through which novelists represent ecological degradation, species loss, and climate change, the study demonstrates how language shapes environmental consciousness and public discourse. The paper draws upon the theoretical frameworks of Hallidayan systemic functional linguistics, critical discourse analysis, and ecocriticism to examine works by Amitav Ghosh, Barbara Kingsolver, and Richard Powers. It argues that literary language plays a crucial role in making abstract environmental threats tangible and emotionally resonant for readers, thereby contributing to the broader cultural project of environmental awareness.

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**Keywords:-** Ecolinguistics, Environmental Discourse, Climate Fiction, Ecocriticism, Systemic Functional Linguistics

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### Introduction

The Anthropocene, a proposed geological epoch defined by humanity's transformative impact on Earth's systems, has prompted urgent reconsiderations of the relationship between language and the environment. As Stibbe argues, the stories we tell about nature, the metaphors we use to describe ecological processes, and the grammatical structures through which we represent human-environment relationships all contribute to the ideological frameworks that either enable or resist environmental destruction (Stibbe 8). Ecolinguistics, the study of the role of language in the life-sustaining interactions among humans, other species, and the physical environment, offers a critical lens for examining how discourse shapes ecological realities.

Literary fiction occupies a distinctive position within environmental discourse. Unlike scientific reports or policy documents, novels engage readers affectively and imaginatively, inviting them to inhabit perspectives, including those of nonhuman beings, that may be radically different from their own. The rise of climate fiction, or "cli-fi," as a recognized literary genre attests to the growing recognition that environmental crisis is not merely a scientific or political problem but a cultural and linguistic one. This paper examines how three

contemporary novelists, Amitav Ghosh, Barbara Kingsolver, and Richard Powers, deploy linguistic and narrative strategies to represent environmental crisis and challenge dominant discourses of progress, mastery, and human exceptionalism.

### **Ecolinguistics: Theoretical Foundations**

Ecolinguistics draws upon multiple theoretical traditions, including Halliday's systemic functional linguistics (SFL), critical discourse analysis (CDA), and the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis of linguistic relativity. Halliday's 1990 paper "New Ways of Meaning" is widely regarded as a founding text of ecolinguistics. In it, Halliday identifies several features of English grammar that, he argues, promote environmentally destructive worldviews: the treatment of uncountable environmental resources as countable commodities, the erasure of human agency in environmental destruction through passive constructions, and the anthropocentric classification of animals and plants as objects rather than agents (Halliday 192).

Stibbe extends Halliday's analysis by proposing a systematic methodology for identifying "stories we live by": the ideologies, framings, and metaphors embedded in everyday language that shape our relationship with the ecological world. These stories include the "ideology of growth" that frames economic expansion as inherently positive, the "metaphor of nature as resource" that reduces ecosystems to inputs for human production, and the "erasure" of nonhuman animals from moral consideration through linguistic strategies such as nominalization and mass-noun classification (Stibbe 23). Ecolinguistic analysis, in Stibbe's framework, involves identifying these stories, evaluating their ecological implications, and seeking alternative discourses that promote ecological sustainability.

Critical discourse analysis, as developed by Fairclough and van Dijk, provides additional tools for examining the relationship between language and environmental power. CDA's attention to the ways in which discourse naturalizes particular power relations, marginalizes alternative perspectives, and shapes public understanding of social issues makes it well suited to the analysis of environmental discourse, which is often characterized by struggles between competing framings of ecological problems and solutions (Fairclough 75).

### **The Great Derangement: Ghosh and the Failure of Literary Imagination**

Amitav Ghosh's *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* is a landmark work of nonfiction that explicitly addresses the relationship between literary form, language, and environmental crisis. Ghosh argues that the modern novel, with its commitment to bourgeois realism, probability, and individual interiority, is structurally ill-equipped to represent the improbable, vast, and collective phenomena of climate change. The novel's emphasis on "the everyday" and its exclusion of the extraordinary, Ghosh contends, constitutes a "great derangement": a cultural failure to confront the most urgent crisis of our time (Ghosh, *Great Derangement* 11).

Ghosh's critique extends to the linguistic conventions of literary fiction. The realist novel's reliance on individualized human characters as agents, its temporal frameworks of personal biography, and its spatial scales of domestic and urban settings all work to contain environmental phenomena within human-centred narratives that obscure the planetary dimensions of ecological crisis. Ghosh calls for new literary forms and linguistic strategies capable of representing the nonhuman agency of climate systems, the deep temporality of geological processes, and the collective scale of environmental catastrophe (Ghosh, *Great Derangement* 63).

In his own fiction, particularly in *Gun Island*, Ghosh attempts to realize this vision by deploying narrative structures that link contemporary climate migration to historical patterns of human-nature interaction, and by using a multilingual, culturally layered prose style that resists the homogenizing tendencies of monolingual realism. The novel's representation of

environmental displacement, as scholars have noted, maps new "cartographies" of ecological exile that challenge conventional distinctions between human mobility and ecological transformation (Ghosh, *Gun Island* 127).

### **Barbara Kingsolver's *Unsheltered*: Language and the Erosion of Certainty**

Barbara Kingsolver's *Unsheltered* employs a dual-timeline narrative structure to explore the relationship between linguistic frameworks and environmental understanding. The novel alternates between a contemporary narrative set in Vineland, New Jersey, during the political upheavals of 2016, and a historical narrative set in the same town during the 1870s, when the naturalist Mary Treat corresponded with Charles Darwin and challenged prevailing scientific orthodoxies. By juxtaposing these timelines, Kingsolver examines how the linguistic and conceptual frameworks of different eras shape the possibilities for environmental awareness.

In the historical timeline, Kingsolver represents the resistance to Darwinian evolution as a failure of language and imagination: the established vocabulary of natural theology, with its assumptions of divine design and stable hierarchies, cannot accommodate the dynamic, relational worldview that Darwin's theory requires. The character of Thatcher Greenwood, a science teacher who attempts to introduce evolutionary ideas into his curriculum, finds himself unable to communicate across the linguistic divide separating the old paradigm from the new (Kingsolver 98).

The contemporary timeline presents a parallel linguistic crisis. The characters struggle to articulate their experience of environmental and economic precarity within a discursive framework dominated by the language of individual responsibility, market rationality, and technological optimism. Kingsolver's title, *Unsheltered*, functions as a central metaphor: the characters are unsheltered not only in the literal sense of living in a structurally unsound house but in the deeper sense of lacking a linguistic and conceptual framework adequate to their environmental situation (Kingsolver 214).

### **Richard Powers's *The Overstory*: Arboreal Language and Nonhuman Agency**

Richard Powers's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The Overstory* represents perhaps the most ambitious attempt in contemporary fiction to develop a literary language adequate to nonhuman agency and ecological temporality. The novel follows nine characters whose lives are variously transformed by their encounters with trees, and its narrative structure mimics the branching, interconnected form of a forest ecosystem. Powers draws extensively on the scientific research of forest ecologists such as Suzanne Simard, whose work on mycorrhizal networks has demonstrated that trees communicate and share resources through underground fungal connections (Powers 142).

Linguistically, *The Overstory* is remarkable for its sustained effort to attribute agency, intentionality, and communicative capacity to trees. Powers employs what might be termed an "arboreal register": a set of linguistic strategies including the use of active verbs for tree actions, the attribution of perceptual and cognitive capacities to trees, and the deployment of tree-related metaphors to describe human relationships. Sentences such as "The beeches spread the word" and "The oaks signal to each other" represent a deliberate challenge to the anthropocentric grammar identified by Halliday, in which nonhuman organisms are typically positioned as passive objects of human action (Powers 276).

Powers's linguistic innovations extend to the novel's temporal framework. By narrating the life spans of individual trees across centuries and the evolution of forests across millennia, *The Overstory* disrupts the biographical temporality of conventional fiction and invites readers to inhabit what he calls "tree time": a radically nonhuman temporal perspective in which human

lives are brief episodes within vastly longer ecological processes (Powers 301). This temporal defamiliarization serves an ecolinguistic function: it challenges the presentism of dominant environmental discourse and makes visible the deep historical dimensions of ecological crisis.

## Conclusion

The ecolinguistic analysis of contemporary fiction reveals that language is not a neutral medium for representing environmental crisis but an active force in shaping ecological consciousness. The works examined in this paper demonstrate three complementary strategies for challenging environmentally destructive discourses. Ghosh calls for new literary forms capable of representing the planetary scale and nonhuman agency of climate change. Kingsolver exposes the historical contingency of the linguistic frameworks through which we understand our environment. Powers develops a literary language that attributes agency, intentionality, and communicative capacity to nonhuman organisms. Together, these writers suggest that the transition to ecologically sustainable societies will require not only technological and political changes but also a fundamental transformation of the linguistic and narrative frameworks through which we understand our relationship with the living world.

Future research in ecolinguistics and literature might productively explore the environmental discourses of non-Anglophone literary traditions, the ecolinguistic dimensions of indigenous storytelling practices, and the emerging intersection of artificial intelligence, language generation, and environmental communication. As the ecological crisis deepens, the critical examination of the stories we tell about nature, and the linguistic resources we use to tell them, becomes not merely an academic exercise but an ethical imperative.

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