



NATURE AND CULTURE: AN ECOLINGUISTICS' ANALYSIS OF *IS A RIVER ALIVE* BY ROBERT MACFARLANE

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Abstract

This study explores the relationship between nature and culture through an ecolinguistics analysis of Robert Macfarlane's Is a River Alive? The research examines how language shapes human perceptions of rivers and the natural world. Using Arran Stibbe's ecolinguistics model, the study investigates metaphors, framing, narrative strategies, and identity constructions to reveal how discourse can either support environmental destruction or promote ecological harmony. Macfarlane challenges the dominant anthropocentric view that treats rivers as mere resources and instead presents them as living beings with memory, agency, and legal personhood. His use of metaphors such as "the river speaks" and "the river remembers" transforms rivers from objects into subjects, encouraging readers to rethink the human-nature relationship. The book also highlights Indigenous worldviews, especially the Māori understanding of the Whanganui River as an ancestor, showing how legal and cultural systems can recognize rivers as persons with rights. This challenges Western dualisms such as nature/culture and subject/object. The study finds that Macfarlane's narrative framing and poetic discourse create ecological awareness by replacing destructive stories with beneficial "stories we live by." His work demonstrates that language is not neutral but a powerful ecological tool that can reshape environmental ethics and inspire sustainable thinking. Thus, Is a River Alive? serves as an important text for understanding the interdependence of language, ecology, and cultural imagination.

Keywords: Ecolinguistics, Nature and Culture, Anthropocentrism, Metaphor, Narrative Framing, Environmental Discourse, River Personhood, Indigenous Knowledge.

Introduction

Ecolinguistics has become an indispensable interdisciplinary response to the environmental disasters of the Anthropocene which is a geological epoch characterized by the marked human influence on Earth's ecosystems. Language, which was previously considered as a neutral medium, is now recognized as a factor that has a significant role in the way societies think and act toward the natural world (Penz & Fill, 2022). Ecolinguistics delves into the impact of language in supporting not only the ecological destruction but also the sustainable ways of thinking. The whole idea is that the prevailing discourses, including consumerism, and anthropocentrism, and techno-optimism, often empower the stories that separate mankind from nature, thus they are contributing to the environmental destruction (Stibbe, 2015a).

Ecolinguistics endeavors to expose and confront the detrimental discourses, at the same time, it underlines and presents the narratives that are good for the environment, the ones that are based on the systems view of the world, and so on. This exploration is based on the linguistic features of metaphors, transitivity and identity constructions and the more general discursive patterns such as mythologies and ideologies found in the texts. Ecolinguistics is not only a critical instrument to overcome climate change, species extinction, and social-environmental injustices, but it is also an ethical project that transforms the relationship between language, mind, and nature (Dash, 2019).

*In this wider linguistic and ecological context, the work of British author Robert Macfarlane is very crucial. He is a leading figure in the lyrical journey of the Earth, human-nature relations, and language. To a great extent, his works react against the mechanized and objectified nature discourses which are very much prevalent in the Western viewpoint towards nature. Rather, it brings back and emphasizes the, by now, somewhat forgotten, and sometimes even extinct, ways of perceiving and expressing the Earth through literature, metaphors, and various modes of communication including folklore, Indigenous traditions, and philosophy (Macfarlane, 2015). Through works such as *The Wild Places* (2007), *Landmarks* (2015), and *Underland* (2019), he revitalizes ecological imagination and challenges the linguistic impoverishment of environmental discourse (Stenning, 2013).*

Macfarlane's creativity is not only descriptive but also expressive, he is employing the very language of ecological awareness that he aims to raise in his readers. He takes great care to show the gradual disappearance of words for natural phenomena (like "ammil" or "smeuse"), along with harshly judging the narratives of nature as mere resource extraction, while at the same time, he uses metaphor and myth to celebrate the unity of

everything. Besides, nature writing can be viewed as a kind of “environmental advocacy,” and the author’s writing brings to the fore this movement by using the tools of literature and cultural criticism. His awareness of the ethical and spiritual aspects of the environment makes his writings particularly suitable for ecolinguistics analysis (Smith, 2020).

One of Macfarlane’s most philosophically and Eco linguistically rich book is *Is a River Alive?*, originally published in *Emergence Magazine* (Macfarlane, 2019). In this piece, Macfarlane explores the notion of legal and spiritual personhood attributed to rivers across different cultures. The book moves through geographies from the Whanganui River in Aotearoa (New Zealand), granted legal personhood by Māori tradition and national law, to the sacred rivers of India, and further to animistic and Indigenous belief systems that perceive rivers as sentient beings (Anderson, 2025).

The book interrogates Western ways of knowing by uncovering rivers’ true nature rather than reducing them to mere “resources” or “water bodies.” On the other hand, Macfarlane underscores the various natures of rivers which encompass relatives, ancestors or gods with rights, duties as well as power. The central question of the author is, *Is a river alive?* is not a question alone, but very metaphysical. It makes one think over such oppositions as human/non-human and subject/object that are generally considered to be opposite to each other. The reading is a good depiction of the influence of words in transforming our relationships with nature. The context of the metaphors, narrative turn-take, and cultural allusions that include Maori spirituality and modern legal frameworks of Macfarlane allow establishing a discourse that is defiant of anthropocentrism. The book *Is a River Alive?* through the prism of ecolinguistics features a progressive form of discourse: language that revives the contact with the non-human world, perceives and provides a pleasant experience to it (Stibbe, 2023).

Methodology

Study design

Qualitative research undertaking that utilized the ecolinguistics framework for its analysis of Robert Macfarlane’s *Is a River Alive?* formed the basis of the present study. It revolved around the query of how language reveals and represents the ecological and cultural meanings of rivers. Thematic analysis was done to select the main motifs pertaining to nature, language, and culture. Theosophy has been used to analyze Macfarlane’s language as to whether it brings out the river as a living being or as an ecological value, depending on the case. The analysis comprised the choice of the supposed quotes that were directly related to the text, and the sections of the text describing the river’s dynamism and connectedness were particularly considered. The language features of metaphors, word choice, and syntax were also crucial in revealing how the language features in general express the ecological and ethnic importance. This method not only gave the researcher a deep insight into the connection of language, nature, and culture in the story but also made it possible to highlight the text’s part in forming the impressions of the world around and the people interacting with it.

Sampling technique

The sampling method applied in this research was purposive sampling, where Robert Macfarlane’s book *Is a River Alive?* was selected based on its relevance to the research questions. The selected text has to its credit a thorough portrayal of ecological and cultural themes, especially rivers with their metaphorical meanings as well as the interconnectedness of these themes through the activities of humans and nature. Some specific sections that depicted such interactions were selected for detailed reading. This selective sampling not only made it possible to examine the language used in disseminating environmental views and cultural stories in writing but also guaranteed that the gathered information was in direct alignment with the study’s objectives and research questions.

Theoretical framework

The Eco-Linguistics Model of Stibbe

The Eco-Linguistics model by Stibbe serves as the main theory for this research and it brings a critical viewpoint to the matter by demonstrating how language not only creates but also shows our understanding of nature and the environment. Simon Stibbe has developed a method of eco-linguistics through his book, which studies the manner in which language controls human relationships with the natural world, highlighting the fact that natural human values and ecological relationships can and should be expressed through language. Stibbe’s model draws attention to the fact that the use of language is crucial in determining whether or not ecological damage continues and it also points out that it could gradually become a powerful tool for promoting environmental consciousness (Asgher et al., 2023).

The model introduced by Stibbe through Ecological Linguistics is built on a few principles that might be the main goals of our study especially in the examination of *Is a River Alive?* authored by Robert Macfarlane. The principles include the understanding that language is not a neutral factor but an ideological one and that it plays a significant role in the human interaction with their environment. Stibbe claims that every language use involves ecological values which might be either implicit or explicit, regardless of the rhetoric being non-technical or media. Furthermore, one of the reasons why this pattern of language use can have a great impact on people’s

understanding of nature is the way rivers, forests, and animals are depicted in language. Hence, Stibbe's model can be utilized as an ideal reference point for the analysis of Macfarlane's language, particularly his consideration of a river as a living, moving entity (Rabbianty et al., 2025).

Among the prominent features of the Stibbe model, one is the idea of environmental narratives-what we talk about the world and how we talk about it. These narratives can alter so much that they even cause people to change their perceptions and their way of interacting with nature. In *Is a River Alive*, Macfarlane, the author, tells a story which portrays rivers not just as actors in the scenery but also as living and colorful beings that are subjected to and connected with man very closely and thickly. The Stibbe model will be used to examine the specific linguistic strategies like metaphors, personification, and descriptive language that Macfarlane employs to illustrate the concept of the river's living nature and his way of doing it (Kravchenko, 2025).

One more crucial element of the Stibbean Eco-Linguistics model is the attention devoted to the impact on the linguistic representations of non-human beings. This question becomes the most relevant in the case of the *Is a River Alive?* when the personification of the river occurs and the river in the context of its appearance and deeds is demonstrated as being alive and, thus, in possession of agency. The model provided by Stibbe helps pose the question of the language choices of preferences involved such as the use of active or passive verbs or metaphors in the formation of the ecological agency of the river. Therefore, the model developed by Stibbe may imply that the language usage of Macfarlane makes an ecological worldview experience in which interdependence among all living beings acts as a reminder.

Besides this, the approach of Stibbe also identifies the presence of metaphors in the creation of ecological realities. The river as an animated organism or as a river that is animate, e.g., are potent instruments when employed as metaphors and can affect environmental values. These metaphors are not only literary steps in the writing of Macfarlane; they also serve as a means of creating environmental awareness because these metaphors make the reader think that the river is not a biologically inactive object of nature but an ecological process. To open up the language that Macfarlane has of building a wider ecological awareness, the paper will examine the metaphors in the prism of the Stibbe model.

Overall, it is possible to say that the Eco-Linguistics model of Stibbe is a strong theoretical framework that could be used to demonstrate how language might serve as a signal and a participant in ecological relations. It offers a critical commentary on the actual production of the ecological significations in the language that Macfarlane employs especially in the rivers imagery, and how the linguistic decisions used at that time result in a specific perception.

Roland Barthes

Roland Barthes (1915-1980), a French literary theorist and philosopher, made a great contribution to the contemporary literary theory and semiotics, as well as cultural studies. His work is best known to have defied the conventional literary criticism and provided novel approaches towards interpreting written and visual texts. Some of his significant contributions and theories are given below (Allen, 2004).

Semiotics The Study of Signs. One of Barthes' most important contributions to theory was his work on semiotics, the study of signs and how they create meaning. Building on the structuralist ideas of Ferdinand de Saussure, Barthes developed his own understanding of how signs function within a language system (Johansen & Larsen, 2005). According to Barthes, a sign consists of two components:

The Signifier. The physical form of the sign, such as a word, image, or sound.

The Signified. The concept or meaning that the signifier represents.

Barthes was of the opinion that the bond between the signifier and the signified was both arbitrary and dependent on the culture. His concept gave rise to a thorough examination of cultural texts and media, since it illustrated how even the most common things or cultural habits could be interpreted as signs with particular meanings attached to them.

Mythology: Cultural Significance of Everyday Life. Barthes, in his seminal book *Mythologies* (1957), scrutinized how even the most trivial cultural artifacts and activities like advertising, the media, and food are actually myths that imply more ideology. According to Barthes, the myths can seduce a sign and make it appear as natural or commonplace whilst hiding the ideological power behind it. For example, a soldier's picture in a French magazine was not merely a soldier's picture but a myth that underpinned the values of nationalism and masculinity. The concept of myth coined by Barthes pointed out the potential to mask the power structures that govern the acceptance of certain ideas in a society through cultural signs.

Death of the Author: The Role of the Reader in Meaning-Making. Barthes came up with a radical concept in his essay *The Death of the Author* (1967), which would transform the literary theory. He claimed that individual motives of an author and their biography should not affect the process of text reading. Rather, the creation of meaning exists between the reader and the text. Barthes made it possible to have a multiplicity of interpretations by killing the author and gave more weight to the importance of the reader in creation of meaning. This notion led to the development of post-structuralist thought that disapproved of fixed readings in favor of open-ended, fluid ones.

The Writerly and Readerly Text. Barthes distinguished between readerly and writerly texts in the analysis of texts. A readable text is one that is digestible, the meaning is predetermined and the reader is a passive consumer. These readings are usually of a traditional narrative format and do not have complicated explanations. Contrarily, a writerly text is complicated, disjointed, and can be interpreted in various ways, which demands that the reader actively participates in text interpretation and brings meaning into being. Barthes perceived the development of modern literature and culture to have become more like writing which promoted movement between the text and the reader.

Later Works: Personal Reflections and Visual Theory. Later in his career Barthes resorted to personal and subjective themes. His work *A Lover Discourse* (1977) discussed the language of love, writing with fragmented and non-linear text that created the feeling of emotional and intellectual complexity of romantic desire. His last installation was the physical treatise on photography and its connection to memory, death, and time, his last painting was titled *Camera Lucida* (1980). It was a piece of personal reflection and theory, which provided an overview of the emotional and semiotic impact of the visual images.

Data Analysis

The ecolinguistics analysis of *Is a River Alive?* by Robert Macfarlane can be considered to have a systematic data analysis procedure, which made it possible to explore the linguistic, ecological, and cultural aspects of the piece in detail. This was done by using the Eco-Linguistics model by Stibbe and was aimed at pinpointing key themes, linguistic elements and environmental metaphors that enhanced the vitality of the river and how it interacted with its nature and culture.

Text Selection

Initially, the procedure of data analysis began with the selection of relevant excerpts from *Is a River Alive?* Thematic relevance to the river, ecological values, and the portrayal of nature in the text were the criteria for the selection of these excerpts. The river was seen as a living active entity and thus human-nature interactions were in the forefront; the latter were specifically selected. All this was guided by the research questions, with the result that the text segments picked echoed the main themes of the study.

Thematic Analysis

Once the excerpts were selected, the next step involved thematic analysis. This entailed reading through the selected text to identify recurring themes and patterns related to nature, culture, and language. The themes identified included:

Rivers as living entities

- The interconnectedness of humans and the natural world
- Ecological metaphors (e.g., rivers as metaphors for life or growth)
- Cultural perceptions of nature and the river

Using an inductive approach, the analysis focused on how these themes emerged from the text and how Macfarlane used language to convey these ideas. Thematic analysis allowed for a deep understanding of how language shaped ecological and cultural perceptions.

Linguistic Features Analysis

The next step in the data analysis procedure was to conduct a close linguistic analysis of the selected excerpts. This involved examining the following aspects:

- **Word Choice:** Specific words used to describe the river and its environment were analyzed, with a focus on words conveying vitality, movement, and interconnectedness.
- **Metaphors:** The analysis focused on the metaphors used, particularly those that represented the river as a living being. Metaphors such as the river "breathing" or "flowing with life" were scrutinized to understand how they constructed ecological values.
- **Syntax and Sentence Structure:** Sentence structure and grammatical choices were analyzed to see how they reflected the dynamic nature of the river. Active verbs, personification, and sentence complexity were key features in portraying the river as an agent.
- **Imagery and Descriptions:** The vivid imagery and sensory descriptions that created a living picture of the river and its environment were identified.

The linguistic analysis was guided by Stibbe's model, which emphasizes how language can either perpetuate or challenge ecological values.

Discourse Analysis

A discourse analysis was conducted to examine how the language used in the text constructed ecological meaning. This analysis involved examining:

Narrative Structure: How the flow of the narrative (chronological, episodic, reflective) supported ecological themes.

- Human-Nature Interaction: The portrayal of the relationship between humans and nature, particularly in terms of respect, harmony, or exploitation.
- Cultural Representations: How cultural beliefs and ecological values were embedded in the text, such as the river being presented as a metaphor for cultural continuity or as a symbol of environmental concern.

This analysis revealed how Macfarlane's narrative conveyed cultural attitudes toward nature and contributed to the construction of ecological meaning.

Identification of Ecological Metaphors

Following Stibbe's model, a key part of the analysis involved identifying and interpreting ecological metaphors in the text. The analysis focused on:

- Metaphors of Life: Instances where the river was described in terms that suggested it was alive, with agency and vitality (e.g., the river "breathing" or "pulsing").
- Metaphors of Interconnectedness: Metaphors that highlighted the interconnectedness of the river with other natural elements and humans.
- Cultural and Ecological Metaphors: How cultural views of the river (e.g., as a source of life, a boundary, or a spiritual symbol) were reflected in metaphorical language.

This step provided insight into how Macfarlane used metaphors to evoke ecological awareness and shape readers' perceptions of the river as a dynamic, living entity.

Interpretation and Synthesis

After completing the thematic, linguistic, and discourse analyses, the next step was to interpret and synthesize the findings. The linguistic and thematic features identified were linked to the research questions to draw insights about how language constructed the river as a living, interconnected entity. The findings were also discussed in relation to Stibbe's Eco-Linguistics model, demonstrating how Macfarlane's text contributed to the shaping of an ecological worldview.

Discussion

This paper breaks down the book "Is a River Alive?" by Robert Macfarlane using ecolinguistics, presenting the book as an example of a transformative use of language that captures the defiance of hegemonic anthropocentrism, as well as the reimagining of the roles of the human and the more-than-human world. The articulation of the main findings of the study concerns the linguistic choices available, particularly the use of metaphor, narrative, and framing, and their potential to enhance ecological consciousness and a worldview of sustainability. The central thesis of the study is that language is not a passive vehicle of communication, rather, it is an active conductor of a reality and an agency which it can instantiate. The paper, using applicable ecolinguistics, and particularly the works of Arran Stibbe, explains the ways in which Macfarlane's text subverts the dominant, Western, commodifying, objectifying, and silencing discourses about nature. Rather, with poetic and metaphorical language, rivers are humanized as creatures with memory, speech, agency, and even legal rights. This linguistic plan helps to make the transition between appreciating rivers as resources to seeing them as relatives or beings, thus redefining the moral and legal position of non-human nature. The study identifies some of the essential ecolinguistics tools when examining the story types, ideologies, frames, evaluations, and identities.

*It is demonstrated that Macfarlane in his book advances positive forms of storytelling, those that focus on connection, reciprocity, and respect between humans and nature, and not the destructive stories that reinforce extraction, domination, and detachment. An example is how by citing the Maori worldview, *Ko au te awa, ko te awa ko au*, Macfarlane questions Western dualism and presents Indigenous ontologies in which rivers are seen as ancestors and kin. The second important finding is that metaphor is not just a literary device but a cognitive model. Metaphors such as the river speaks or the river remembers interrupt the mechanistic metaphors that exist in scientific and bureaucratic discourse and instead form a set of relations where nature is understood as animate and in a state of relationship. These metaphors are correlated with ecolinguistics aims of promoting ecological ethics via narration. Another focus of the study is the multidisciplinary discourse strategy of Macfarlane, which integrates legal, spiritual, scientific and poetic frames to introduce a pluralistic view on rivers.*

The metaphor is rooted in the reality of rivers having legal personhood in states such as New Zealand, India, and Colombia, as references to rivers previously had legal status, indicating that language evolutions can be transformed into tangible policy reforms. Lastly, the study ends with the conclusion that ecolinguistics storytelling, as in the case of Macfarlane, can serve as a discursive resistance. It suggests substitutes to the prevailing anthropocentric discourses and advances an ecocentric ethic of interdependence and reciprocal

respect. Mac farlane does not just revive rivers through language but also invigorates a revival of ecological thinking itself.

Conclusion

This research book, Robert Macfarlane's *Is a River Alive?* shows the potential of language as an interrogative and subversive tool of the dominant discourse(s) of mainstream ecology. It illustrates the human-nature relationship with a transformative and constructive vision, promoting a more respectful and connected relationship with the environment. It does this with the thoughtful use of metaphor, framing and discourse across different disciplines. Through the analysis we have shown that language is not a neutral tool; it has the capacity to construct and de-construct the moral and cultural frameworks of society and re-shape an ecological consciousness. The analysis of Macfarlane's language is one of the principal findings of this research. Describing nature is one thing; redefining it is something else. By endowing rivers with human attributes, including a memory, a voice, and even personhood, he defies the most fundamental anthropocentric worldview that sees nature as passive and an object of exploitable resources. Macfarlane's use of metaphors describes rivers as active, dynamic, and living creatures with voice and purpose and not as commodities to be controlled. The importance of this metaphorical recasting is to contest the prevailing perception of the world and the relationship people have with the natural world and foster a worldview that sees rivers not as objects to be controlled. Additionally, the paper highlights Macfarlane's engagement with Indigenous worldviews, particularly the Maori view of rivers as ancestral and paternal. The quote of the Whanganui River case in New Zealand, *I am the river, and the river is me*, is a strong rebuttal to Western thoughts about humans and nature being separate. This paper shows how the attempt by Macfarlane to investigate such views undermines the dualist thinking that exists in western philosophy where humans and nature are separate. The book, citing the example of legal cases in which rivers have been granted personhood, e.g. in New Zealand, India and Colombia, shows how a change in language and cultural values can lead to a change in the law and in environmental policy.

Moreover, this research found that the application of important ecolinguistics notions, including types of stories, framing, identity construction, and ideology, that Macfarlane uses is informative about the effect of language on ecological values. The book changes the prevalent discourse of rivers as resources to rivers as relatives or ancestors to prompt a moral and ethical rework of human interactions with nature. This reframing is essential since it will change rivers to objects of exploitation to living beings that should be respected and legally safeguarded. A mixture of scientific, poetic, legal, and spiritual discourses, which Macfarlane has introduced to the study, also becomes an important conclusion of this paper. Due to his use of several frames, it is possible to understand the rivers in a more holistic manner, and readers are encouraged to learn nature on the emotional, intellectual, and spiritual levels. This cross-disciplinary strategy emphasizes how literature and poetry can be used to supplement scientific and legal discourses in developing a more comprehensive and moral ecological world. In the end, the present study found that Macfarlane's book illustrates how the human language can be used to bring change in how we view and respond to the natural world. Taking a metaphorical and narrative approach to bringing rivers back to life and introducing them as living creatures, Macfarlane challenges readers to rethink their connection with nature. By so doing, *Is a River Alive?* can serve as an example of how ecolinguistics storytelling can be used to promote a more sustainable, respectful and ecologically conscious world.

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