

EXAMINING LANGUAGE AS A TOOL FOR ENVIRONMENTAL ADVOCACY IN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE: AN ECOLINGUISTIC PERSPECTIVE ON DR. SEUSS'S *THE LORAX*

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Abstract

Environmental degradation has become a very big issue in the world and therefore there is a need to incorporate the ecological awareness in the early learning. Children literature is a very sensitive component in shaping of young minds, which can be adopted as a tool in advocacy of environment. The paper presents the language of environmental advocacy in one of the children story books, The Lorax by Dr. Seuss in the context of ecolinguistic approach by Stibbe (2015). The study is aimed at disclosing how the environmental awareness can be provoked by the linguistic choices in the story, and how the anthropocentric worldviews can be criticized and how the values of sustainability can be promoted to young readers. The text is analyzed with the help of the theoretical framework of ecolinguistics and, in particular, the concepts of the stories-we-live-by and cognitive framing that help to single out the following key points of the text: metaphors, the narrative voice, and the moral positioning. These findings show that The Lorax employs persuasive ecological metaphors, emotionally loaded terms and morality dichotomies to deliver the message that environment should be taken care of urgently. In the text, the idea of ecological consciousness and activism is developed among the targeted audience through descriptions of the consequences of the abuse of the environment and the moral duty to respect nature. The paper demonstrates the potential of children literature as the potent means of environmental education and supports the use of ecolinguistic approaches to the interpretation of literature and designing the curriculum.

Key Words: Children's Literature, Story Book, Ecolinguistics, Environmental Discourse, The Lorax

1.Introduction

The rising concern over the environmental crises that are currently being witnessed across the globe, including climate change, loss of biodiversity, pollution, and deforestation, has caused a rise in the realization of the role of language in human perceptions and interactions with nature. The environmental challenges are increasingly becoming complex and these issues need to be handled through interdisciplinary approaches. Ecolinguistics is one of them, and it is a potent line of investigation that investigates the connection between language and ecology with a particular focus on the ways in which linguistic forms and discourses shape ecological consciousness, actions, and ideologies (Ismail, 2024).

Language is not a description of the world, but it constitutes it. This is the main assumption of ecolinguistics which examines the role of discourse in conservation or destruction of the

environment. In this context, literature, and more so children literature emerges as a rich field to explore. Children literature is the main instrument of initial thinking and moral growth, which builds the worldview, values and attitude to nature of young readers. Children books have the potential to create empathy with nonhuman life, even in a still sense of ecological responsibility, and to criticise anthropocentric ideologies, through stories, metaphors, and imaginary worlds (Celik and Sirkinti, 2024).

The new field of ecolinguistics has in the recent past been increasingly concerned with examining the linguistic patterns and ecological messages in texts directed at the youth. This is more so during a time when environmental education is being redefined to include emotional, cultural and linguistic concerns. However, despite the fact that the environmental topics in children literature have been studied in various disciplines with references to the pedagogical or literary lens, a lack of analysis of the application of a rigorous ecolinguistic approach to the study of how these texts can be used as a tool of environmental promotion still exists (Neupane, 2023).

This study will fill that gap in the hope of investigating language use in children literature to create an ecological narrative, human-nature relationship and environmental consciousness. This paper exposes the linguistic strategies that writers use to advance environmental values through a critical ecolinguistic examination of a set of children books on the ecology themes and their capability to inform the environmental imaginaries of the young readers.

1.2 Synoptic Overview of the Data

The Lorax is a corporate greed and nature destruction environmentalist fable placed in an attractive and imaginative story. It is the story of Once-ler who discovers a beautiful forest with the Truffula Trees and rich ecosystem. He embarks on cutting the trees to create a product called a Thneed that he believes everyone needs with the profit motive in mind.

His business grows and the forest begins to wear out. The Lorax, a little mustachioed character, who can be referred to as speaking on behalf of the trees, appears to be reminding the Once-ler of the impact of his actions on the environment. In spite of the complaints of the Lorax, the Once-ler keeps on taking advantage of the forest until it is completely devoid of Truffula Trees, and the ecosystem and his company crumble.

The narration is in the form of a flashback, as the Once-ler narrates the story to a young boy, who is interested in knowing the story. Finally, the Once-ler presents the boy with the last Truffula seed, and puts the hope in his hands to regrow the forest, and not to repeat the previous mistakes.

1.3 Statement of the Problem

Children literature is a great way to make children aware of the complicated social and environmental problems. The Lorax by Dr. Seuss has been known as a story with an environmental theme but not much research has been done on the manner in which the language employed in the text serves as a tool of environmental activism. Although eco-criticism and eco-linguistics are becoming more and more significant, there is still a lack of knowledge concerning the influence of linguistic decisions (in terms of metaphor, personification, narrative construction, and word choice) on the perception of nature and environmental responsibility in readers. The paper fills that gap through the analysis of how Dr. Seuss uses words to promote environmental awareness and sustainability in a child-friendly format.

1.4 Research Objectives

1. In order to discuss linguistic elements employed in The Lorax to express environmental messages and activism.

2.To discuss how language forms the connection between nature and humans in the story.

1.5 Research Questions

1.Which are the linguistic devices that Dr. Seuss employs in *The Lorax* in order to advocate environmental causes?

2.What does the text construct in the relationship between human and the natural environment using language?

1.6 Significance of the Study

The importance of the study is in the fact that it investigates the role of language in children literature, or rather *The Lorax* by Dr. Seuss, as a means of environmental activism. The research provides an ecolinguistic perspective, which implies the identification of certain strategies of narrative structure, metaphorical expressions and wording decisions used to create ecological awareness and shape the attitude of young readers to nature and sustainability. Through the analysis of *The Lorax*, the research does not only reveal the implicit environmental messages hidden in the text but also underlines the importance of children literature in the formation of eco-conscious values at an early age. This has a contribution to the ecolinguistic theory as well as the environmental education in the sense that through literature, the literary discourse can be used to foster an environmental ethics and a sense of collective environmental responsibility among the future generations.

2. Literature Review

Ismail (2024), in his paper, “Ecocriticism and Children Literature: Dr. Seuss *The Lorax* as an example”, establishes a strong background putting the ecolinguistic investigation in context of the whole ecocriticism discipline and the role of children literature in developing the environmental awareness of the young readers. The goal is to examine the role of *The Lorax* as an eco-advocacy text, its ability to deliver environmental stewardship and the consequences of environmental ignorance. In the framework, Ismail applies ecocritical theoretical perspective to combine textual analysis and discourse study to reveal the ideological messages encoded in narrative and imagery. The data used in the study is the full text of *The Lorax*, its narrative pattern, word-use, repetitive themes, and visual metaphors, but the sampling procedure is not described in greater detail than this pick of an exemplar. As it can be analyzed, the combination of eco-lexicon (e.g., Once-ler, Truffula trees, Lorax speaks for the trees), narrative voice, and didactic storytelling is a way of creating an environmental message that can be a force of change. The results show that *The Lorax* is a good way of raising ecological awareness and cautioning against unsustainable industrialization and also helping to create a feeling of stewardship and co-existence between humans and non-human nature. Ismail concludes with a call for further ecolinguistic and ecocritical investigations into children’s literature.

Laliena & Tabernero Sala’s (2023) conducted an ecocritical study of children’s picturebooks, in which the authors frame their research in light of increasing environmental concerns and the rise of ecocriticism in children’s literature. Their objective is to uncover the “keys to an ecocritical reading” by analyzing how literary discourse, multimodal design, character development, and focalization work together to engage young readers in ecological reflection. Drawing on theoretical frameworks from Reception Aesthetics and Literary Pragmatics (Eco 1979; Iser 1987; Jauss 1990), along with ecocritical parameters proposed by Goga et al. (2018), the study examines a corpus of 25 canonical picturebooks by five influential female authors. Employing a qualitative content

analysis of both verbal text and visual elements, sampling emphasizes paratextuality, illustration/design, character development, and focalization. Findings highlight that these multimodal strategies—especially the interplay of visual and linguistic codes—cultivate a “sense of wonder,” position characters in dynamic relationships with nature, and foster intersubjective, ecocentric reading experiences for children.

Neupane (2023) examined how children’s picture books function as semiotic systems that promote environmental awareness through ecosemiotics—a subfield of ecocriticism focused on the signs and symbols in nature-centered texts. Against concerns about environmental degradation, his study aims to reveal how green literature can nurture ecological consciousness from early childhood. Utilizing a qualitative interpretative approach rooted in ecocritical and semiotic theory, Neupane analyzes two seminal picture books—*The Secret Garden* and *The Giving Tree*—chosen purposively as culturally influential texts exemplifying nature–human interaction. By closely interpreting the text through semiotic analysis of the imagery, narrative and symbolic language, he discovers that both texts are characterized by interconnectedness between man and nature, using visual and linguistic signifiers (e.g. the changing seasons, personified trees) to develop environmental empathy and understanding in children through scaffolding. His argument in a nutshell is that these texts are not merely descriptive of nature, but rather they are prescriptive, encouraging young readers to read ecological relationships and in this way urging them to support conservation through semiotic activity.

Aslam and Ashfaq (2023) discussed the way in which picture books exploit the semiotic means available to them to build ecological awareness in young readers; language, visuals, and multimodal characteristics. The study is based on the ecological literacy framework of David Orr who acknowledges that the multimodal learning of children is of great significance in developing environmental values. The study had explored how effective ecological semiotics is in picture books in both the English and Pakistani contexts. The authors apply the principles of ecosemiotics and ecolinguistics to examine the role of linguistic and visual signs in texts in promoting the ecological literacy. The research uses a purposive collection of five children picture books (three English: *10 Things I Can Do to Help My World*, *Penguins Don Wear Sweaters*, *Can We Save Tigers* and two in Urdu: *Kaala Bhoot*, *Kho Kho Kho*) as its sample. Aslam and Ashfaq conclude that, although both English and Urdu books use eco-semiotic strategies including nature metaphor, personification, and visual focus on ecosystems, the English ones portray a more advanced combination of multimodal semiotics and directly address current environmental concerns; the Pakistani ones, in turn, are less advanced in terms of ecological semiotic complexity, even though they are a good start.

Aslan and Baş 2020 anchored the analysis in ecocriticism to examine the construction of relationships between people and nature with the help of the semiotic resources in the text. Their primary objective was to determine how eco-critical perspectives reveal nature as more than a backdrop, but as a cyclical system imbued with identity and agency. Utilizing a qualitative discourse-analytic framework, they performed a close textual analysis on the entire book, treating the narrative and linguistic signs as data. The sample was comprehensive—every narrative and descriptive passage—rather than a selection of excerpts. Findings highlighted that the text challenges anthropocentric hierarchies by granting non-human subjects discursive identity, representing ecological processes as intertwined with sociological, psychological, and cultural dimensions, and presenting nature’s transformation as a cycle rather than a one-way human

exploitation. The study concludes that children's literature can effectively function as environmental advocacy by semiotically restoring the voice and agency of nature.

3. Methodology

The particular study is based on qualitative paradigm of research. While, the source has been comprised of children story books out of them a particular story book that is named as *The Lorax* (1971) by Dr. Seuss has been selected as the sample of the study. Meanwhile, the researchers have employed Stibbe (2015) Ecolinguistic approach as the theoretical framework. However, the data has been analysed through the lens of textual analysis method.

4. Data Analysis

This section explores the ecolinguistic elements in *The Lorax* by Dr. Seuss, analyzing how the language of the text functions as a form of environmental advocacy. As an influential piece of children's literature, *The Lorax* encapsulates powerful ecological messages embedded in linguistic patterns that challenge dominant anthropocentric narratives. Using an ecolinguistic framework, this analysis focuses on how language choices—such as personification, metaphor, agency, framing, modality, repetition, and evaluative lexis—work together to position nature as a moral entity, humans as agents of destruction and restoration, and the reader as a potential change-maker.

1. Personification and the Voice of Nature

One of the most profound ecolinguistic features of *The Lorax* is the personification of nature through the titular character.

"I am the Lorax. I speak for the trees, for the trees have no tongues (Seuss, 1971, P. 29).

This line gives the natural world a voice through the Lorax, who acts as a moral spokesperson. The phrase "the trees have no tongues" illustrates the voicelessness of nature, a common theme in environmental discourse, and justifies the Lorax's intervention. The use of first-person narrative ("I speak") reinforces the urgency and moral weight of his advocacy.

This form of grammatical agency is critical in ecolinguistics: giving grammatical subjectivity to nature promotes empathy and frames it as an active stakeholder. By making the Lorax a literal speaker for the ecosystem, Seuss invites young readers to perceive nature not as a passive backdrop but as a moral agent with intrinsic value.

2. Framing of Environmental Destruction

Language in *The Lorax* frames environmental degradation as a direct consequence of unchecked industrialization and consumerism. The Once-ler, who narrates the story in retrospect, initially celebrates the economic success of his Thneed factory but is later haunted by the environmental devastation he causes.

"I chopped down the Truffula Tree with one chop. (Seuss, 1971, P. 22)

This is an example of active voice with a clearly defined agent. The Once-ler uses the first person and a transitive verb, clearly marking himself as the cause of the action. In ecolinguistic terms, this is a key strategy for assigning moral accountability. Contrast this with the more common passive constructions often found in public environmental discourse (e.g., "Trees were cut down"), which obscure the human agent.

As more trees are felled, the Once-ler continues to frame his actions in terms of economic progress:

"Biggering, and Biggering, and Biggering" (Seuss, 1971, P. 24)

This repetitive gerund structure highlights a critique of capitalist growth ideology. The grammatical construction lacks punctuation, symbolizing an unending expansion that eventually

collapses. Ecolinguistically, this is an instance of dominant discourse deconstruction—undermining the “growth equals good” narrative that pervades much economic thought.

3. Evaluative Language and Emotional Appeal

Seuss employs evaluative lexis to construct a stark emotional contrast between the natural and industrialized worlds. The early description of the Truffula forest is idyllic and sensory:

“Those trees! Those Truffula Trees! All my life I’d been searching for trees such as these. The touch of their tufts was much softer than silk. And they had the sweet smell of fresh butterfly milk.” (Seuss, 1971, P. 41).

Here, the language appeals to touch and smell through positive appraisal—“softer,” “sweet,” “fresh.” This romanticized vision of nature sets up a strong contrast with the polluted aftermath of industrialization:

“You’re glumping the pond where the Humming-Fish hummed! No more can they hum, for their gills are all gummed. The smoke was smogulous. The factory spilled Schloppity-Schlopp in the pond.” (Seuss, 1971, P. 45)

Words like “glumping,” “gummed,” “smogulous,” and “Schloppity-Schlopp” are neologisms with strong negative affective charge. They mimic industrial noise and mess, adding sensory disgust to the reader’s experience. The playful sound patterns in these words serve dual purposes: engaging young readers and reinforcing the grotesque imagery of pollution.

4. Repetition and Rhyme as Persuasive Tools

A key feature of children’s literature is repetition, and Seuss uses it to embed ecological messages:

“Unless someone like you cares a whole awful lot, nothing is going to get better. It’s not.” (Seuss, 1971, P. 53)

This sentence, repeated twice in the text, serves as the central moral lesson. The use of second person (“you”) involves the reader directly, transforming them into a potential agent of change. The phrase “a whole awful lot” combines informal tone with emotional weight, making the message accessible yet compelling.

Rhyme and rhythm play a central role in driving memorability. The text follows a consistent AABB rhyme scheme:

“I meant no harm. I most truly did not. But I had to grow bigger. So bigger I got.” (Seuss, 1971, P. 62)

The use of rhyme does more than entertain—it reinforces linguistic coherence, emotional impact, and thematic development. Each rhyming couplet layers consequence upon consequence, culminating in environmental collapse and the call for restoration.

5. Modal Verbs and the Language of Obligation

Modality in the text frames actions as necessary, likely, or impossible. The Lorax uses deontic modality to communicate moral obligation:

“You should be ashamed.” You’re glumping the pond... you ought to be sorry!” (Seuss, 1971, P. 62)

These expressions of moral judgment teach readers that environmental harm is not just unfortunate but ethically wrong. The Once-ler, too, eventually adopts this frame, shifting from epistemic (“I thought I was doing right”) to deontic (“I now know I did wrong”) modal constructions. This shift from justification to guilt illustrates a change in cognitive and moral perspective, underscoring one of ecolinguistics’ goals: to realign how people talk about and value the environment.

6. Dialogic Structure and Conflict of Worldviews

The interactions between the Once-ler and the Lorax represent a dialogic struggle between two worldviews: exploitation versus conservation. The Lorax continually issues warnings:

"I'm the Lorax who speaks for the trees, which you seem to be chopping as fast as you please!"
(Seuss, 1971, P. 64).

This is a metalinguistic moment—the Lorax not only speaks, but critiques the language and behavior of the Once-ler. His tone grows increasingly confrontational, reflecting the escalating moral urgency. The Once-ler initially dismisses these warnings, using language of economic necessity:

"A Thneed's a Fine-Something-That-All-People-Need!" (Seuss, 1971, P. 67).

This corporate slogan-style phrase simplifies a complex issue into a catchy sales pitch. From an ecolinguistic standpoint, this is the reproduction of a destructive discourse—consumer need is constructed as absolute, unquestionable, and morally neutral. However, the text ultimately subverts this frame, showing that Thneeds bring not prosperity but ruin.

7. Symbolism and Moral Closure

The final scene is deeply symbolic:

*"And all that the Lorax left here in this mess was a small pile of rocks, with one word...
UNLESS."* (Seuss, 1971, P. 68).

The capitalized "UNLESS" is both a visual and linguistic signal. It transforms a concrete object (a rock) into an abstract ethical principle. Later, the Once-ler hands the boy a seed:

"You're in charge of the last Truffula seed. And Truffula trees are what everyone needs." (Seuss, 1971, P. 70)

Here, the imperative mood ("You're in charge") conveys responsibility and empowerment. Unlike earlier scenes dominated by destruction and regret, the ending shifts to hope and action. It calls for a new story to live by, one where environmental care takes precedence over profit.

Throughout *The Lorax*, Dr. Seuss deploys a rich array of ecolinguistic techniques that both entertain and educate. The text works as an effective example of environmental advocacy by providing a voice to nature, focusing on grammatical agency, evaluative and emotive language, as well as framing the story in terms of moral conflict and resolution.

Lorax is so popular that it is not only the story but the way it uses the language to challenge the existing narratives of progress, consumption, and responsibility. The Lorax achieves one of the most important objectives of ecolinguistics, namely, to change the language that people use to define and identify with the natural world, in its graphical metaphor, rhythmic appeal, and moral direct address.

In this discussion, it has been demonstrated that children literature, which is not linguistically naive, can be employed to pass across complex ecological ideologies. It proves that *The Lorax* is not just a warning, but a language model, which will enable the future generation to participate in thinking green.

5. Findings & Discussion

Based on the ecolinguistic framework by Stibbe (2015), the analysis of *The Lorax* reveals how the book is the model of environmental advocacy because of its nature, agency, and moral responsibility discursive structure. Stibbe finds the ideologies, evaluations, identities, metaphors, erasure, and salience to be the linguistic building blocks of ecological stories that are engraved in language. The narrative discourse of *The Lorax* was analyzed according to these categories, and it

was revealed how Dr. Seuss creates a worldview that criticizes unsustainable practices and ecological awareness.

This is the ecological message of the story, constructed by a contrastive structure of the natural world, embodied in the Truffula Trees, Swomee-Swans, and the Lorax, and the industrial world, under the influence of the capitalist enterprise of the Once-ler. Evaluation is one of the most conspicuous discursive mechanisms in the story and can be defined by Stibbe as the manner in which language makes judgments about something that is good or bad. In *The Lorax*, the natural world is presented positively and colorful: there are bright-colored tufts of the Truffula Trees, and fresh air, and shade of their Truffula tufts. Such judgmental language attaches nature with intrinsic value and beauty. By contrast, the language of the Once-ler measures production and growth as positive: “business is business!” and “biggering and biggering”, which shows a destructive ideology of economic growth with any ecological consequences.

Identity is another major area in Stibbe framework and closely related to evaluation. The Lorax is linguistically established as the ethical spokesperson of the environment, his identity is thus created wholly in the form of advocacy, the statement that he is most recognizable with is: I speak to the trees. This does not only provide him with discursive power but also demonstrates a relational identity that links his life to the preservation of the ecology. The Once-ler on the contrary is anonymized, both in visual and language sense he is not fully revealed, and his name is vague, which lowers the personal responsibility. He is a product of the terminology of Industrialism and consumerism, a fact that speaks of the anthropocentric ideas that Stibbe cautions are prevalent in most of the modern discourse.

The role of agency is the most important to the understanding of the way the specific story book constructs environmental responsibility. Lorax as a non-human being is shown to be active and vocal, and thus a representation of ecological agency. He threatens, cajoles and scolds, and employs angry speech acts such as, I am telling you, sir, and You are glumping the pond where the Humming-Fish hummed! The explicit and directive language is contrasted to the use of grammatical erasure, which the Once-ler is prone to, the effect that Stibbe attributes to the refutation of agency. As an example, when the environmental destruction is irreversible, the Once-ler makes no effort to use the personal pronoun, claiming, “They all went away,” and, “The trees were all cut down.” The repetition of passive voice, hiding human agency is a shared discursive technique in ecological degradation narratives.

Metaphor is another strong tool of narration in the text and Stibbe has claimed that metaphor can be used to expose ideologies. The Thneed is used as a metaphor of needless consumerism the thing which is needed by everyone although its utility is questionable. The metaphor through which the growth of the industry under the Thneed production is presented is the biggering of the Once-ler, a neologism used by the author to ridicule the attitude of uncontrolled growth. These metaphors do not stand impartially; they serve as an indictment of consumerist values and commodification of nature.

Another point of the analysis is to pay attention to the process of erasure, which is one of the most ethically loaded processes in the analysis of ecolinguistics. In *The Lorax*, erasure is enacted through the silencing of non-human perspectives—until the Lorax speaks. His voice temporarily disrupts this norm by representing the forest’s interests, yet his ultimate disappearance and the devastation left behind illustrate the systemic suppression of ecological voices. The Once-ler, post-

destruction, acknowledges the void, but only after the damage has been done, reinforcing the idea that ecological advocacy is often reactive rather than preventive.

What makes *The Lorax* particularly effective as a text of environmental advocacy is its appeal to salience and reframing. Stibbe describes salience as what is foregrounded or backgrounded in discourse. In *The Lorax*, environmental consequences are made highly salient through visual and linguistic repetition: barren landscapes, coughing Swomee-Swans, and polluted skies are persistently emphasized. The reframing of economic development from something beneficial to something morally and ecologically harmful is a central discursive shift that supports advocacy.

Finally, the book concludes with a powerful instance of moral reframing and engagement, rooted in the line: “Unless someone like you cares a whole awful lot, nothing is going to get better. It’s not.” Here, agency is transferred to the reader, and environmental responsibility becomes personalized. This is a call to action, which acts as a performative utterance; it does not describe reality, it tries to create it. In this case, the language is doing advocacy at the first hand, which fits within Stibbe aim of discovering linguistic resources that would guard the ecosystems that life relies on.

6. Conclusion

Overall, *The Lorax* discourse is a counter-story of the prevailing ideologies of growth and consumption. It does not only employ language to echo environmental issues but also to promote ecological ethics, empowerment, and responsibility. Viewed through the prism of the ecolinguistic approach, the text turns out to be a fertile ground of opposition to the discourses of ecological degradation, showing that even children literature may be used as an effective instrument of environmental activism.

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