

Arran Stibbe. *Ecolinguistics: Language, Ecology and the Stories We Live By*. 2nd ed. Routledge, 2021. Pp. 260. £29.59. ISBN: 9780367428419.



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Since its first publication in 2015, Arran Stibbe’s *Ecolinguistics* has been hugely influential in research in this field. The book’s ideas have been further propagated through an online course taken by thousands of people around the world. This second edition has been thoroughly updated in the light of recent research and global events and includes an entire new chapter, on “Narratives.”

Ecolinguistics is a book with a mission. Stibbe seeks to equip the reader to discern how the texts we receive and produce have an impact on the ecological realm of plants, animals, humans, and their interrelations. He provides a method of linguistic analysis by which one can infer the cognitive structures embedded in texts which cumulatively shape what we believe, how we think, and thus how we behave. He calls these the “stories we live by”—using the word “story” not in the traditional sense of a narrative of events, but to refer to a mental model of some aspect of life. So, for example, a discussion of climate change may convey the “story” that *CLIMATE CHANGE IS A PROBLEM*—a mental model that implies a need to seek a *solution* to this “problem”—whereas another discussion of the same topic might convey a different “story” that *CLIMATE CHANGE IS A PREDICAMENT*, which would invite a different kind of response than one solely of problem-solving. Stibbe’s method is to tease out the “story” from the text under analysis and then to assess how well it serves or violates an “ecosophy”—that is, a chosen set of ecological values. The ecosophy that Stibbe deploys in the book is “Living!,” defined as encompassing the flourishing of all living things—and thus including a concern for the well-being of individual animals, for example, as well as the bigger picture of ecosystemic health.

Chapters are dedicated to nine different categories of “stories”: ideologies; framing; metaphors; evaluations; identities; convictions; erasure; salience;

and narratives. In practice, these different kinds of “stories” interweave in a multitude of ways; but this arrangement of chapters enables Stibbe to fold into a single system an array of linguistic theory by which to analyse the gamut of rhetorical strategies. Each point is illustrated by examples from texts of many different kinds covering a diverse scope of ecological concern—from climate change, pollution, extinction, and sustainable development, to social justice, factory farming, junk food, and consumerism. At the end of each chapter there’s a more extended analysis of a particular set of relevant texts. The “Erasure” chapter, for example, includes a study of the erasure of plants and animals, as living beings, from ecosystem assessment reports and the Sustainable Development Goals.

The majority of Stibbe’s analyses demonstrate a complete or partial failure of the texts in question to measure up to his ecosophy of “Living!” The “stories” they reveal tend to be ones promoting ecologically destructive paradigms of economic growth and maximal consumption. The exceptions—texts offering more ecologically helpful “stories”—come most strongly from literary sources such as haiku and New Nature Writing. The problem, Stibbe makes clear, is that ecologically helpful messages conveyed to small numbers of sensitive readers by such refined texts will have only a small impact compared with the bombardment of unhelpful messages reaching large audiences through the mass media, advertising, political rhetoric, and industrial lobbying. He emphasises that it is *patterns* of appraisal, erasure, facticity, salience, and so on, rather than individual instances, that drive the “stories we live by.” When these patterns are relentlessly reinforced by countless texts ramming home the same messages, they produce a hegemonic sense of “the way things are” that it’s very difficult for people to question. Thus, Stibbe calls for the application of useful “stories,” perhaps originally gleaned from more rarefied sources, in kinds of texts that will reach larger audiences.

A case in point are environmental campaigning organisations, whose avowed purpose is to serve a recognisable ecosophy, but which, in pursuing their aims, may use the same kind of language as commerce, encouraging consumerist behaviour and thereby reinforcing the very things they’re trying to fight. It’s to be hoped, therefore, that the skills of ecolinguistic analysis presented in this book may be promoted beyond academia to inform the communication strategies of organisations concerned

about ecology, whether in government, business, media, religion, conservation, campaigning, or environmental management. In *Ecolinguistics*, Stibbe writes as a teacher, introducing the concepts step by step in clear explanatory language, equipping the reader with an array of useful terms (all restated in the glossary), and demonstrating the analysis of many apposite quotations from the exemplar texts. The very structure of the chapters suggests a template for a one-semester course, each session exploring a different category of “stories,” into which the tutor and students could slot their own choice of texts for analysis.

The new chapter looks at “narratives” in fiction, fairy tale, oral storytelling, creation myth, and earth history. Narratives differ from the other categories of “stories” in that they’re not necessarily concerned with truth claims—although sometimes they are. Stibbe shows how, nonetheless, ecological-ethical “entailments” may be inferred from both the structure and the text of a narrative. The multivalency of symbol, motivation, and causation that can be in play in narratives makes this a big, complex subject whose ecolinguistic study could easily expand to fill an additional book. I understand that Stibbe is currently working on exactly such a new book about “econarratives.”

A major development in public life since 2015 is the mainstreaming of so-called “conspiracy theories” into powerful discourses of lies and delusion accepted as incontrovertible truth by millions of people. Stibbe describes the use of facticity patterns in the widespread discourse of coronavirus denial and warns how similar rhetorical strategies could increasingly be applied in denial of other major ecological issues. Most of the kinds of rhetoric analysed in this book rest on some sort of normative notion of factual reality, which different communicators interpret selectively and give a spin in accordance with their motivations and values; but what we’re now seeing, on a hugely influential scale, is the promotion and acceptance as true of statements that appear to be an exact negation of reality. Stibbe’s method involves making assumptions about ecological truth on the basis of available evidence. Most of this evidence itself takes the form of texts by authors whose expertise and integrity one has decided to trust. If two competing discourses, with absolutely polarised claims about what is true, are presented with equally high conviction, then to discriminate between them will require the tools of linguistics to be supplemented by a sufficient knowledge of science and history and indeed

by some understanding of the psychology of deception and delusion. Perhaps this could be an area for further ecolinguistic exploration by Arran Stibbe and his colleagues.

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