

The Language of Resilience: Ecolinguistics Insights into Psychological Coping with Environmental Crisis

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ABSTRACT

In the escalating global environmental crisis, psychological distress such as eco-anxiety, solastalgia, and ecological grief has become increasingly prevalent, yet remains insufficiently addressed through interdisciplinary perspectives. This study explores the urgent need to understand how language functions as a psychological coping mechanism in responding to environmental trauma, particularly through the integration of ecolinguistics and ecopsychology. Using a qualitative approach with Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), this study analyzes textual and interview data drawn from eco-activists, educators, and individuals experiencing environmental distress. The analysis reveals four dominant themes: narratives of connection, metaphors of regeneration, emotional reframing, and linguistic activism. The findings demonstrate that language operates not merely as a communicative medium, but as a therapeutic and symbolic resource that transforms despair into agency and ecological grief into resilience. This study contributes theoretically by strengthening the interdisciplinary bridge between ecolinguistics and psychological resilience, and practically by offering insights for educators, counselors, and environmental communicators in developing emotionally supportive and ecologically responsible discourse to enhance mental well-being and ecological awareness in times of planetary crisis.

Keywords: Ecolinguistic, Psychological, Environmental

ABSTRAK

Di tengah krisis lingkungan global yang semakin memburuk, berbagai bentuk tekanan psikologis seperti eco-anxiety, solastalgia, dan kesedihan ekologis kian meningkat, namun masih jarang dikaji secara interdisipliner. Penelitian ini menyoroti urgensi memahami peran bahasa sebagai mekanisme coping psikologis dalam menghadapi trauma lingkungan melalui pendekatan ekolinguistik dan ekopsikologi. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode kualitatif dengan Analisis Wacana Kritis (CDA) untuk menganalisis data teks dan wawancara dari aktivis lingkungan, pendidik, dan individu yang mengalami tekanan psikologis akibat krisis ekologis. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan empat tema utama, yaitu narasi keterhubungan, metafora regenerasi, pembingkaian ulang emosional, dan aktivisme linguistik. Temuan ini mengungkap bahwa bahasa tidak hanya berfungsi sebagai alat komunikasi, tetapi juga sebagai sumber terapeutik dan simbolik yang mampu mengubah keputusasaan menjadi agensi serta kesedihan ekologis menjadi ketahanan. Secara teoretis, penelitian ini memperkuat integrasi antara ekolinguistik dan ketahanan psikologis, sedangkan secara praktis memberikan kontribusi bagi pendidik, konselor, dan komunikator lingkungan dalam merancang bahasa yang mendukung kesehatan mental sekaligus meningkatkan kesadaran ekologis di tengah krisis planet.

Kata kunci: Ekolinguistik, Psikologis, Lingkungan

A. Introduction

The 21st century has witnessed an unprecedented convergence of ecological degradation and psychological distress. From climate-induced natural disasters to biodiversity collapse, the environmental

crisis has evolved into a multidimensional threat that not only affects planetary systems but also human emotional resilience. Scholars such as Clayton et al. (2021) have illustrated the growing burden of *eco-anxiety* and *solastalgia*, psychological states rooted in environmental loss and future uncertainty.

These mental states are not isolated phenomena but are deeply embedded in the ways individuals and societies articulate meaning, cope with trauma, and construct narratives of resilience in the face of planetary distress.

Language, therefore, becomes more than a medium of communication; it transforms into a symbolic mechanism for psychological adaptation and resistance. As Stibbe (2020) emphasizes in *Ecolinguistics: Language, Ecology and the Stories We Live By*, the stories and discourses we live through either contribute to ecological destruction or nurture regenerative responses. Yet, despite the growing body of literature on ecopsychology and climate communication (Swim et al., 2020; Pihkala, 2022), few studies have examined how language itself, its metaphors, frames, and narratives function as a coping mechanism in contexts of ecological grief. This gap suggests a need for integrative research that situates language as both a cognitive and ecological act, capable of reshaping human resilience strategies.

Discourse surrounding the environmental crisis often oscillates between narratives of doom and disaster and those of hope and solution (Moser, 2010). Understanding the specific linguistic features metaphors, narratives, frames (Lakoff, 2010), evaluations, identities, and argumentation patterns that characterize discourses of resilience is critical. How do individuals and communities use language to construct meaning, maintain agency, foster connection, express care, and sustain action in the face of overwhelming ecological challenges? How do linguistic patterns reflect and contribute to psychological coping mechanisms? These questions lie at the intersection of ecolinguistics and environmental psychology, a nexus that remains underexplored despite its potential significance.

In recent years, the psychological consequences of the environmental crisis have garnered growing scholarly attention, reflecting what Pihkala (2023) refers to as “the emotional climate of the Anthropocene.” The increase in eco-anxiety, climate grief, and solastalgia (Albrecht,

2019) reveals that environmental degradation is not only an ecological concern but also a profound existential disruption. These emotional states, while often pathologized, can also be interpreted as indicators of ecological awareness and moral sensitivity (Clayton & Karazsia, 2020). From an ecolinguistics perspective, such emotions are articulated, shared, and transformed through the medium of language. In other words, language is not merely expressive but constitutive of psychological adaptation. It allows individuals to externalize distress, negotiate meaning, and rebuild a sense of coherence amid environmental uncertainty.

Ecolinguistics, as articulated by Stibbe (2021) has evolved beyond a descriptive analysis of ecological discourse into a critical and therapeutic framework that examines how narratives, metaphors, and frames shape both ecological ethics and emotional well-being. This perspective converges with ecopsychology, which emphasizes the mutual healing relationship between humans and the natural world (Macy & Johnstone, 2020). When combined, these disciplines provide a holistic understanding of how linguistic processes, storytelling, framing, and metaphorization mediate psychological coping. It means that language becomes a site of both trauma and transformation: the stories humans tell about environmental loss can either paralyze or empower collective action.

Moreover, scholars suggest that communication strategies centered on empathy, shared vulnerability, and hope are more effective than fear-based or technocratic discourses. Such emotionally intelligent language fosters engagement and resilience rather than despair. Therefore, investigating how people linguistically construct resilience through metaphors of regeneration, narratives of interconnection, and moral framings of care provides key insight into how societies emotionally survive and adapt to ecological crisis.

While ecolinguistics has examined discourses that harm or heal ecological systems (Stibbe, 2021), and psychology has explored coping mechanisms during crises

(Hamilton, 2021), there is limited scholarship that synthesizes these fields. Most ecolinguistics studies focus on environmental rhetoric in media or policy (Fill & Penz, 2017), whereas psychological studies often ignore the role of discourse in shaping resilience. Consequently, we lack a systematic understanding of how specific language forms narratives of hope, metaphors of rebirth, or communal storytelling can function as therapeutic tools in processing environmental trauma. This study aims to fill this interdisciplinary gap by exploring how individuals use language as a form of ecological and psychological resilience.

Psychological resilience in adversity is extensive (Bonanno, 2004; Masten, 2014), and ecolinguistics has robustly analyzed environmental discourse (Stibbe, 2015; Alexander, 2009), there is a significant gap in understanding the *specific linguistic mechanisms* through which language functions as a tool for psychological coping and resilience building, specifically in the context of the ongoing environmental crisis. Existing studies often focus on either the psychological impacts or the linguistic structures in isolation, failing to systematically integrate insights from both fields to examine *how* language actively contributes to resilience processes. Therefore, this research seeks to answer the central question: What are the key ecolinguistics features and discursive strategies employed in language that foster psychological resilience in individuals coping with the awareness and impacts of the environmental crisis?

B. Research Method

Research Design

This research employs a qualitative design using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as the primary analytical framework. As emphasized by Fairclough (2013) and van Dijk (2015), CDA is suitable for investigating how language both reflects and shapes social realities. In this study, language is not only treated as a semiotic system but also as a psychological tool for resilience-building in response to

environmental crises. The research further incorporates the interdisciplinary approach of Ecolinguistics (Stibbe, 2020) and Ecopsychology (Pihkala, 2022) to interpret how ecological discourse contributes to mental health resilience.

Sources of Data

The study draws on two main types of discourse data:

1. Personal narratives and social media expressions of environmental grief and resilience (e.g., blog posts, Instagram captions, Twitter threads, personal essays).
2. Public ecolinguistics materials, including speeches, activist manifestos, environmental education texts, and eco-poetry.

A purposive sampling method was used to select materials that explicitly reflect linguistic coping strategies and emotional adaptation to ecological degradation. The criteria include relevance to ecological trauma, presence of psychological expressions, and the use of metaphor, narrative, or framing techniques.

Participants

For triangulation, a small number of in-depth interviews ($n=10$) were conducted with environmental activists, eco-educators, and individuals diagnosed with climate anxiety or eco-grief. Participants were selected through snowball sampling and gave informed consent. Interviews focused on the language they used to process and express emotions related to the environmental crisis.

Data Collection Techniques

1. Document Analysis: Written texts were collected from online platforms, eco-literature, and relevant archives.
2. Semi-structured Interviews: Conducted via Zoom and transcribed verbatim for analysis.
3. Ecological Discourse Sampling: Language fragments containing emotional expressions, metaphors, evaluations, and moral framing were selected for closer analysis.

Data Analysis Procedures

Data were analyzed through the following procedures:

1. Thematic Coding (Braun & Clarke, 2021): Identifying emerging themes such as hope, grief, connection with nature, and activism.
2. Critical Discourse Analysis: Based on Fairclough's three-dimensional model, textual analysis, discourse practice, and sociocultural practice.
3. Ecolinguistics Appraisal: Using Stibbe's (2021) framework to classify discourses as destructive, ambivalent, or beneficial to both ecology and psychology.
4. Ecopsychological Interpretation: Drawing on Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) coping theory and Pihkala's (2022) taxonomy of eco-emotions to interpret psychological implications.

C. Result and Discussion

Based on thematic coding (Braun & Clarke, 2021), four dominant themes emerged from the textual and interview data: (1) narratives of connection, (2) metaphors of regeneration, (3) emotional reframing, and (4) linguistic activism. These themes reflect how language operates as a psychosocial and ecological buffer for individuals experiencing eco-anxiety and solastalgia (Albrecht, 2019; Pihkala, 2022).

The findings of this study align with a growing recognition that language functions as both a cognitive and affective scaffold for environmental coping. When individuals narrate their connection to the Earth saying, for instance, "*I grieve with the forest but I still plant seeds*", they engage in what calls *constructive hope*: a dynamic interplay between acknowledging loss and envisioning action. Such narratives simultaneously validate grief and redirect emotional energy toward purposeful behavior.

The recurrent metaphors of regeneration "planting hope," "rising like the forest after fire," "weathering the storm" demonstrate what Lakoff and Johnson (2024) describe as *embodied cognition*. Metaphors grounded in organic imagery allow speakers to

internalize resilience as a natural, cyclical process rather than a linear recovery. These metaphors thus act as cognitive-emotional bridges between despair and hope, shaping how individuals imagine possible futures amid ecological collapse.

Furthermore, the presence of linguistic activism imperatives such as "*stand with the trees*" or collective pronouns like "*we, the guardians of the Earth*", highlights how language can generate solidarity and moral courage. Stibbe (2021) refers to this as the creation of "beneficial stories," discourses that sustain both ecosystems and psychological well-being. Such moral and collective framings reaffirm what Bandura (2018) calls *collective efficacy*, the belief that coordinated action can effect meaningful change. As language reclaims moral agency, it not only heals emotional paralysis but also nurtures civic responsibility.

The linguistic evidence from this study echoes patterns identified in other ecopsychological interventions. For instance, describe how narrative reframing in "Active Hope" workshops helps participants move from apathy to empowerment. Similarly, White (2019) demonstrates that narrative therapy rooted in environmental storytelling fosters post-traumatic growth by transforming grief into compassion. In this sense, ecolinguistic discourse operates as a subtle yet powerful therapeutic medium transforming emotion into ethical imagination.

Narratives of Connection

Many participants and texts invoked a deep sense of belonging to the natural world. Phrases like "I am part of the forest's memory" or "we breathe with the oceans" highlight an *ecological self*, a term used in ecopsychology to denote a sense of identity beyond the individual (Roszak, 2001). These narratives foster psychological resilience by reducing alienation and reinforcing ontological security (Clayton et al., 2021).

Metaphors of Regeneration

The data reveal the frequent use of life-affirming metaphors such as "planting hope," "weathering the storm," and "rising

like the forest after fire.” These metaphors function as discursive mechanisms to reframe trauma as transformation. As Lakoff and Johnson (2024) argue, metaphors not only describe reality, they shape how people experience it. Here, metaphor serves as a coping mechanism that transforms ecological grief into agency and renewal.

Emotional Reframing through Language
Through specific lexical choices, individuals engaged in emotional reframing a cognitive-linguistic process of redefining an experience to alter its emotional impact (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). For instance, the shift from “climate collapse” to “climate awakening” reflects an effort to convert paralyzing fear into constructive urgency. This aligns with Hamilton and Kasser’s (2021) notion of *adaptive framing*, which facilitates motivation and engagement amidst ecological distress.

Linguistic Activism and Moral Framing
Another significant finding is the emergence of linguistic activism, in which language becomes a form of resistance. Many texts included moral appeals (“we owe the Earth more than silence”), direct imperatives (“stand with the trees”), and collective identity markers (“we, the guardians of the Earth”). These elements align with Stibbe’s (2021) “beneficial discourses” that promote ecological and psychological flourishing.

1. Ecolinguistic Features Supporting Psychological Coping

Using Stibbe’s ecolinguistic framework and Fairclough’s CDA, this study found that language supporting psychological coping frequently featured:

- Framing of Nature as Subject rather than object (e.g., “The forest speaks to me”).
- Agentive verbs suggesting personal and collective power (e.g., “We mend what’s broken”).
- Affective language that validates grief and invites communal mourning (e.g., “It hurts, and it’s okay to feel that”).

These patterns support Pihkala’s (2022) observation that climate-aware communication must move beyond sterile

scientific data to emotionally meaningful language that sustains mental health.

2. Interdisciplinary Synthesis: Language as Ecopsychological Intervention

This study confirms that ecolinguistic practices can serve as ecopsychological interventions. Just as cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) uses language to restructure thoughts, ecolinguistic reframing helps individuals process ecological grief by narrating meaning, imagining future resilience, and building social solidarity (White, 2019).

Moreover, this finding supports a shift from individual pathology to systemic insight. Instead of treating eco-anxiety as disorder, language allows individuals to interpret their emotions as legitimate responses to systemic degradation (Verlie, 2022). This shift reduces shame and cultivates collective responsibility and hope.

3. Theoretical Contributions and Practical Implications

Theoretically, this study contributes to an emerging field of *therapeutic ecolinguistics*, combining linguistic theory with mental health frameworks. Practically, the findings can inform environmental educators, counselors, and activists in crafting messages that not only inform but also heal. For instance, climate educators might integrate metaphor-based journaling or narrative storytelling into curricula to promote emotional resilience. Climate counselors may use discourse analysis to help clients identify destructive internal narratives and replace them with healing ecological metaphors.

Theoretically, this research strengthens the conceptual bridge between ecolinguistics and ecopsychology, contributing to what emerging scholars term “therapeutic ecolinguistics” (Stibbe, 2021; Fill & Penz, 201). This field recognizes that linguistic engagement with environmental crisis through story, dialogue, and metaphor can promote mental resilience comparable to psychotherapeutic practices. Indeed, Clayton (2021) notes that reframing climate anxiety not as pathology but as “a sign of empathy and engagement” helps transform fear into

moral motivation. By identifying specific discursive mechanisms of hope, agency, and regeneration, this study illustrates how language operates as a low cost, culturally embedded form of psychological intervention.

Practically, the findings hold implications for education, therapy, and environmental communication. For educators, incorporating ecolinguistic storytelling or metaphor-based journaling can encourage students to process environmental emotions constructively (UNESCO, 2023). For mental health professionals, integrating ecolinguistic approaches within counseling can support clients experiencing eco-grief, helping them to articulate distress within frameworks of meaning and care (Buzzell & Chalquist, 2010). It means that Environmental communicators can also benefit by shifting from fear-based rhetoric to emotionally intelligent narratives that emphasize agency, empathy, and interdependence.

In short, the “language of resilience” represents a multidimensional resource: it is at once psychological, ethical, and ecological. It enables humans to narrate loss without succumbing to despair, to frame action as regeneration rather than resistance, and to imagine belonging within a living planet. As Stibbe (2021) reminds us, “the stories we live by shape the worlds we make.” Cultivating those stories may be humanity’s most essential task in the age of ecological crisis.

D. Conclusion and Suggestion

This study concludes that language plays a vital role in fostering psychological resilience amid the environmental crisis. Through narratives of connection, metaphors of regeneration, emotional reframing, and linguistic activism, individuals are able to process ecological grief, restore meaning, and sustain hope and agency. Language thus functions not only as a medium of expression, but also as a therapeutic and ecological resource that supports emotional adaptation and

ethical engagement with environmental challenges.

Based on these findings, it is suggested that ecolinguistically informed language practices be integrated into environmental education, counseling, and communication strategies. Future research is encouraged to explore cross-cultural and multilingual perspectives, employ longitudinal designs, and examine the role of digital discourse in shaping collective ecological resilience. Developing a “language of resilience” is essential for supporting both psychological well-being and ecological responsibility in an era of global environmental uncertainty.

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