



Situated Ecology Revisited: Implications of William Wordsworth's "The World is Too Much with Us" in the New Era

Yu Su(✉)

School of Foreign Languages, Shanghai University, Shanghai, China
cindysu010617@shu.edu.cn

Abstract. The present study is conducted in light of the changing linguistic profile of the modern world and a heightened sense of accountability for nature worldwide. The article attempts to draw inspiration from William Wordsworth's "The World Is Too Much with Us" and reflect on its contemporary relevance, with a specific sociocultural context in contemporary China. The aim is to beware people of the withering connection with nature and alert people to the unconscious language use that is intrinsically biased against nature, with an ultimate goal of changing the way we perceive the natural world through the language glass.

Keywords: Nature · environment · ecology · ecolinguistics · poem

1 Introduction

Against the backdrop of the ecological crisis, which is accompanied by the frequent occurrence of natural disasters and the mass extinction of species, ecology, which can be traced back to the late 19th century (Miao, 2014:97) [1], has undergone a paradigmatic revolution in thinking mode (Miao, 2014:110) and become a pan-disciplinary topic, giving rise to a wealth of studies centering on intensifying eco-environmental protection and reviving eco-civilization. In the field of humanities, with the increased recognition of enhancing people's ecological awareness through mental power, emerging disciplines such as eco-aesthetics, eco-literature, eco-translatology, and eco-linguistics are continuously drawing wisdom from classic literary works and reflecting on their contemporary relevance (see Fan, 2005 [2]; Zhao, 2011 [3]; Han, 2013 [4]; Miao, 2014; Lei & Miao, 2020 [5]; Zhou, 2021 [6], for overviews), with mushrooming studies as their footnotes.

It is against this changed literary and linguistic landscape that the present study attempts to draw inspiration from William Wordsworth's "The World Is Too Much with Us" and relate it to the eco-environmental protection policy implemented in contemporary China.

2 Situated Ecology

Recent years have witnessed the growing interest in the interdisciplinary sphere between ecology and linguistics regarding language as an influential component in, if not crafting,

influencing people's relationship with nature, rather than simply as an abstract system in its own right. The growing interest has encouraged a wealth of studies centering on the construction of language architecture so as to better represent ecological systems (Xin & Huang, 2013:7) [7], giving rise to the analysis of ecological discourse, the ecological analysis of discourse, and the studies of the metaphorical "language ecology", demonstrating linguists' resolution to jointly realize the goal of eco-environmental protection with other disciplines. From this perspective, ecology is situated.

First, ecology is situated linguistically. At first glance, ecology and language appear to be unconnected. However, language, especially grammar, as a resource of literacy experience, is a guide to human behavior. Scholarly discussion of the relationship between ecology and language is currently understood mainly in two dimensions (Fill & Mühlhäusler, 2006 [8]; Fan, 2005; Xin & Huang, 2011 [9]; Xin & Huang, 2013): one is the study of the survival and development of language, usually metaphorically labelled as "the ecology of language" or "language ecology" (Xin & Huang, 2013:7); the other is "linguistics of ecology", emphasizing the impacts of language and the contributions of linguists on the environment. The preset study will focus on the second branch, in which an oft-cited study is that of Halliday's studies (Halliday, 1990; 2001) [10, 11]. In his pioneering study, Halliday (1990) enumerated human destruction of natural ecology and stated that human beings always failed to recognize the slowly emerging conceptual crisis, which, was largely constructed through language. Inexhaustible linguistic evidence can prove the validity of Halliday's statement: certain lexicons are artificially associated with positive references (e.g., unprecedented growth rate, organizational climate improvement) while others negative (e.g., recession), which subconsciously influence (and even shape) people's perceptions towards resource utilization; nouns are divided artificially, with uncountable nouns (e.g., water, air, crude oil, etc.) subsequently being associated with a bottomless pit of resources...

Second, ecology is situated in certain socio-cultural contexts. Though environmental protection has been a global undertaking, China has developed a unique mode through collective endeavors, which manifests multiple facets of innovation and institutional breakthroughs. A glimpse into China's statement reveals that, as opposed to the traditional Western dualism—which perceived the relationship between human beings and nature as contradictory and opposite—from ancient times till now, China has always enjoyed abundant intellectual resources in ecological protection (Miao, 2014:100). Encapsulated within the language is the Chinese intelligence which the rest of the world can access: At the National Conference on Eco-Environmental Protection (May 18, 2018), Chinese President Xi Jinping quoted ancient Chinese sage Zhuang Zi's thoughts, "Heaven and earth coexist with me; all things and I are one (tiān dì yǔ wǒ bìng shēng, wàn wù yǔ wǒ wéi yī)," which embodies the philosophy of humanity and nature are a community of life. Within the conceptual framework of fostering an "innovative, coordinated, green, open, and shared" environment, China accelerates the formation of spatial configurations, industrial structures, production models, and lifestyles that favor resource conservation and environmental protection, leaving time and space for nature to recuperate (Xi, 2018, 2021a, 2021b) [12, 13].

Third, ecology is situated moderately in Wordsworth's literary works. In the field of ecological studies, deep ecology and shallow ecology represent two opposite concepts

with their respective features and roles. Due to the problem of polarization and dualism, however, none of them proved effective in interpreting the ecological concerns revealed by “The World Is Too Much with Us” (Zhao, 2011:88). Illuminated by the ancient Chinese wisdom of “the golden mean (zhōng yōng)”, it would be more appropriate to interpret William Wordsworth’s ecological concerns in a way of balance. Neither did Wordsworth’s affection for nature lead him to the path of opposing anthropocentrism, nor did his concern for the connection between different objectives in the natural world collapse into environmental centrism. In addition, gravitating towards nature did not dim his political concerns. In aggregate, harmony and balance are the central philosophy in Wordsworth’s literary works.

3 Human-Nature Relationship in “The World is Too Much with Us”

Composed circa 1802, “The World Is Too Much with Us” is a sonnet written by the English Romantic poet William Wordsworth, in which the poet criticizes the world of the First Industrial Revolution for being engrossed in materialism and distancing itself from nature. Throughout the poem, personification is widely used to help the readers better connect with the narrative description of nature (“This Sea that bares her bosom to the moon”; “The winds that will be howling at all hours”; “... sleeping flowers”) and increased the intimacy.

The poet begins by describing humankind’s relationship with the natural world in terms of loss, and line by line he further specifies the “loss” from economic, spiritual, and cultural perspectives. The disconnection occurs when, due to the impacts of industrialization, humankind loses the ability to appreciate, celebrate, and identify with nature. In terms of the economic sense, the lunacy of the urban world lies first in the fact that most urban dwellers are always losing time or money. People reels from unreality to unreality each day, witnessing a never-ending series of appointments and transactions encroaching on their lives. Nature, in their eyes, is anything but an object that can only be exploited from an economic perspective. Judging from spiritual loss, people give emotional attachment away in exchange for industrial progress—a “boon”—yet, is a “sordid” boon. In chasing material development, people have reduced themselves to a less-than-urbane state. In the final line of the poem, the poet describes a cultural loss, and the tone of resignation suggests the loss is permanent and unregainable. At this moment of emotional despair, the poet can do nothing but reminisces about the days when nature played a significant role in human life, and yet, is lost and untraceable.

4 The Green Language

The aesthetic orientation of The Lake Poets used to be interpreted as a kind of escape from reality, similar to that of the politically disillusioned — “abandon oneself to nature (jì qíng shān shuǐ)” — in ancient China (Brown, 1989) [14]. Compelling arguments have been made (see Coupe & Bate, 2000 [15]; Bate, 2013 [16]; Zhang, 2013 [17]; Alexander & Stibbe, 2014 [18], for overviews), however, that the foregoing criticisms failed to truly

recognize the wisdom and intelligence embodied in English Romantic Lake Poetry. In his exploration of the relationship between politics of poetry, Bate (2013) challenged the orthodoxies of new historicist criticism by arguing that, contrary to critics who suggest that Wordsworth was a reactionary who failed to represent the harsh economic reality of his native Lake District, the poet's politics were fundamentally "green" (Bate, 2013:1). Similarly, Zhang (2013) argued that though English Romantic Lake Poets do not systematically express their eco-ethical idea, they do provision nature's value and affirm its inherent purpose of biological community (2013:85). In the same vein, the present study aims to delve into the either explicit or implicit eco-ethical philosophy revealed by the chosen poem and relate it to the contemporary world.

5 Spatiotemporal Limitations and Contemporary Implications

Notably, instead of suggesting a way to regain what is lost, the tone of the poem is rather desperate, stating that humankind's original relationship with nature can never be revived ("we lay waste our powers"; "We have given our hearts away"; "we are out of tune", etc.). Such kind of thinking mode, which is rather passive and laissez-faire, is by no means applicable to the contemporary world.

Contrary to what is displayed in Wordsworth's poem, China always takes initiative in protecting the eco-environment, both in "building a beautiful China" and "promoting the cause of world environmental protection". As articulated at the National Conference on Eco-Environmental Protection (May 18, 2018) and many other (inter)national occasions, China details its resolution regarding resource conservation and environmental protection, showcasing its determination to maintain "lucid waters and lush mountains (lǚ shuǐ qīng shān)" and construct eco-civilization.

Hence, considering the contemporary implications of "The World is Too Much with Us", what was memorized and has always enlightened contemporary China, is its holistic and inclusive reflection on the relationship between the human world and nature, which spanned from economic, spiritual, to cultural spheres and is reconcile with the Chinese route of development. China is no longer pursuing high-speed development through a fragmented and palliative approach with one-off products; instead, it calls for a longitudinal and overall process that includes the cultural, economic, institutional, and security dimensions of ecological conservation and a target responsibility mechanism. As China is marching forward with speed and scope in the new era, along the way, ecological concerns revealed in Wordsworth's poem can serve as an endless repository of wisdom and lessons from which the country may partake at will.

6 Conclusion

Situated in the era of enhanced ecological awareness and changing literary landscape, the present study probes into the biological community constructed in William Wordsworth's "The world is too much with us" and reveals its modern ecological value. New insights have been offered, as the poem possesses the wisdom and ethical concerns that transcend the times. With that being said, spatiotemporal limitations are also pointed out as the poem is intrinsically passive, which, is by no means suitable for the contemporary world.

It is expected that the present study can enhance people's ecological awareness through the language glass.

References

1. Miao, F. G. (2014). From ecological science to ecologism: A paradigmatic revolution in thinking mode. *Journal of Yunnan University (Social Sciences Edition)*, 13(6), 97–101.
2. Fan, J. J. (2005). A review of ecolinguistic studies. *Foreign Language Teaching and Research*, 37(2), 110–115.
3. Zhao, G. X. (2011). The Problems of Deep and Shallow Ecological Criticisms Viewed from the Ecological Studies of Wordsworth's Poems. *Shandong Foreign Language Teaching Journal*, 32(06), 84–88+92.
4. Han, J. (2013). The Review of the Domestic Research on Ecolinguistics. *Language Teaching and Linguistic Studies*, 4, 107–112.
5. Lei, L., & Miao, X. W. (2020). The Study of Ecosophy in Ecological Discourse Analysis. *Foreign Language Research*, 3, 120–123.
6. Zhou, W. J. (2021). A New Horizon for Ecolinguistics: From Green Grammar to Ecological Grammar. *Journal of University of Science and Technology Beijing (Social Sciences Edition)*, 37(3), 247–253.
7. Xin, Z. Y., & Huang, G. W. (2013). Systemic functional linguistics and ecolinguistics. *Foreign Language Education*, 34(3), 7–10.
8. Fill, A., & Mühlhäusler, P. (Eds.). (2006). *Ecolinguistics reader: Language, ecology and environment*. A&C Black.
9. Xin, Z. Y., & Huang, G. W. (2011). Fifty years of development of systemic functional general linguistics. *Foreign Language Education*, 32(4), 22–26.
10. Halliday, M.A.K. (1990). New ways of meaning: The challenge to applied linguistics. *Journal of Applied Linguistics*, (6), 7–16.
11. Halliday, M. A. (2001). Is the grammar neutral? Is the grammarian neutral?. In *Communication in linguistics* (pp. 179–204). Gref Publishers.
12. Xi, J. P., (2021, Jan 7). Understanding China—70 Years of Progress and Development. Retrieved from http://en.qstheory.cn/2021-01/07/c_580351.htm
13. Xi, J. P., (2021, Sept 13). The Governance of China II. Retrieved from http://en.qstheory.cn/2021-09/13/c_659428.htm
14. Brown, M. (Ed.). (1989). *The Cambridge history of literary criticism*. Cambridge University Press.
15. Coupe, L., & Bate, J. (Eds.). (2000). *The green studies reader: From romanticism to ecocriticism*. Psychology Press.
16. Bate, J. (2013). *Romantic ecology: Wordsworth and the environmental tradition*. Routledge.
17. Zhang, A. H. (2013). English Romantic Lake Poets Ecological Ethics Concern on the Relationship between Man and Nature. *Foreign Language Education*, 34(3), 85–88.
18. Alexander, R., & Stibbe, A. (2014). From the analysis of ecological discourse to the ecological analysis of discourse. *Language sciences*, 41, 104–110.

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), which permits any noncommercial use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

